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# German prisoners of war in Britain, 1940-1948: Policy and performance.

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# **German Prisoners of War in Britain, 1940-1948:**

## **Policy and Performance**

Gillian S. Clarke

Submitted to the University of Wales in fulfilment of the requirements for  
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Swansea University, 2006

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## Summary

Towards the end of the Second World War the British government embarked on an ambitious policy involving the large-scale employment of German prisoners of war in various sectors of the British economy, particularly in agriculture. By the autumn of 1946 it had succeeded in shipping more than 400,000 of these men to Britain from the Continent and America specifically for this purpose. Contrary to the requirement of the 1929 Geneva Convention, which stated that POWs should be repatriated 'as soon as possible after the conclusion of peace', thousands of these prisoners remained in this country as a supplementary labour force until 1948. Consequently, Britain's actions in this respect raise a number of important questions, which the present thesis seeks to address. Through an examination of a variety of primary source material, including official documents of the British and Canadian governments, parliamentary debates, commentary by contemporary informed observers, as well as a body of valuable secondary literature, it explains why officials believed that such a radical policy was necessary, the many practical difficulties that had to be overcome to bring it to fruition, and how, considering her international treaty obligations, Britain was able to justify legally the retention of POWs for three years after the war's end. Among the conclusions drawn is that Britain's POW policy was born of a selfish desire to alleviate a complex mixture of psychological, economic and political pressures, which came to bear on the country as a result of the war and its aftermath. Since the needs of the prisoners themselves were rarely taken into account, or what they, and others, felt to be their right to return to their homeland at the end of the war, the episode shows how British government officials were prepared to compromise Britain's moral standing in the wake of a global conflict which had, above all, been fought and won by the Allied powers on moral and ethical grounds.

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## Abbreviations

ARC	Allied Reparations Committee
BAOR	British Army on the Rhine
BBC	British Broadcasting Company
CCG	Control Commission for Germany
CCG (BE)	Control Commission for Germany (British Element)
CCS	Combined Chiefs of Staff
CSDIC	Combined Services Detailed Interrogation Centre
CDU	<i>Christlich Demokratische Union</i> (Christian Democratic Union)
DEA	Department of External Affairs
DEF	Disarmed Enemy Soldiers
DPs	Displaced Persons
EAC	European Advisory Commission
FORD	Foreign Office Research Department
FRPS	Foreign Research Press Office
GMWU	General and Municipal Workers' Union
HDSE	Home Defence Security Executive
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
KPD	<i>Kommunistische Partei Deutschland</i> (Communist Party of Germany)
MAF	Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries
MOI	Ministry of Information
MOL	Ministry of Labour

NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer
NFU	National Farmers' Union
NSDAP	<i>Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei</i> (National Socialist German Workers Party)
NUAW	National Union of Agricultural Workers
PID	Political Intelligence Department
POW	Prisoner of War
POWD	Prisoner of War Department
PWE	Political Warfare Executive
RAF	Royal Air Force
SEP	Surrendered Enemy Personnel
SHAEF	Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Expeditionary Force
SPD	<i>Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands</i> (Social Democratic Party of Germany)
SPD	Special Projects Division (Office of the United States' Provost Marshal General)
TGWU	Transport and General Workers' Union
TUC	Trade Union Congress
UN(O)	United Nations (Organisation)
USSR	Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics
WLA	Women's Land Army
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association

## Introduction

In October and early November 1939 discussions were already taking place within the British government over whether enemy prisoners could be used as a labour force. Requests from the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAF) and the Ministry of Supply (forestry) for the allocation of prisoner-of-war (POW) workers were, however, refused by the Ministry of Labour and National Service on the grounds that there was still a relatively high level of unemployment among unskilled British workers and that, as a result, such moves would be opposed by the trade unions and, consequently, politically damaging for the government. Discussions of this sort were, in any case, on a purely academic level at that time, since relatively few enemy prisoners had fallen into British hands: in November 1939, no more than 150 POWs were held in the UK, a number that had only increased to 257 by March 1940.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, decisions taken by officials in June of that year to transport all German POWs to the Dominions, specifically to Canada, as a security precaution, meant that the prospect of employing German POWs in the British economy on a significant scale was not likely to be realised for as long as war continued in Europe.

In all, 3,700,000 German prisoners of war were captured by the British during the Second World War, including 2,000,000 imprisoned after the capitulation in May 1945. Over a sixteen-month period following the cessation of hostilities in Europe, the British government shipped thousands of these men to the UK, including the 34,000 who had been sent to Canada after 1940 and 140,000 held in the USA 'on behalf of the British'.<sup>2</sup> The old arguments for not employing these prisoners were no longer

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<sup>1</sup> Hansard House of Commons Debates (HOC), 8 March 1940, col. 824, statement by Sir Victor Warrender MP, Financial Secretary to the War Office.

<sup>2</sup> LAC RG25/2784 621-LB-40, letter from the Canadian High Commissioner, London, to the Department of External Affairs, Ottawa, 18 October 1945.

valid in 1945. This was because Britain's war economy had been stretched to its absolute limits and, with millions of British workers yet to be demobilised from the Armed Forces, the prisoners now offered an indispensable pool of labour, particularly on the land. By September 1946 the number of German POWs imprisoned on British soil peaked at just over 400,000, a proportion of whom made up around one quarter of Britain's agricultural workforce.<sup>3</sup>

Given these impressive statistics, it is all the more surprising that relatively little has been written about this extraordinary episode in the historical literature on the Second World War. This is not to imply, of course, that the subject is entirely uncharted territory, or that what has been written to date is in any way insignificant. On the contrary, all existing studies have helped enormously to enlarge my understanding of the questions explored in this thesis. By far the most comprehensive account of the experiences of German POWs held in Britain during the period is Matthew Barry Sullivan's *Thresholds of Peace: Four Hundred Thousand German Prisoners and the People of Britain 1944-1948*. Drawing on memoirs and autobiographical material, Sullivan provides a composite picture of the moment of surrender and the POWs' journey to Britain, after which he devotes his attention to the hardships endured by the men and the efforts made by ordinary British citizens, and in particular members of the Christian churches, to help them. Indeed, his is essentially an optimistic account of what the author calls "person to person peace" and the myriad human acts through which true peace is founded'.<sup>4</sup> This theme of reconciliation between the prisoners and the British people is also explored by Miriam Kochan in *Prisoners of England* and by Pamela Howe Taylor in her two books, *Enemies Become Friends* and *The Germans*

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<sup>3</sup> J.D. Steinert, 'British Recruitment of German Labour 1945-1950', in Panikos Panayi (ed.), *Germans in Britain Since 1500* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1996), 172.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Barry Sullivan, *Four Hundred Thousand German Prisoners and the People of Britain, 1944-1948* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1979), foreword.



*We Trusted*.<sup>5</sup> From papers left by her late father, who had been a Methodist minister at a POW camp in Lancashire, Howe Taylor pieces together a story of the developing contact between the prisoners in the camp and people from the neighbouring village of Oswaldtwistle after 1946, and reaches the conclusion, like Sullivan, that Christian understanding played a pivotal role in stimulating European reconciliation. Collectively, therefore, this body of work constitutes an important part of the social history of the German POWs in Britain after the war.

Other texts have been confined within relatively narrow subject boundaries and are interesting for the light they shed on specific events in the history of German POWs in British custody. The reaction of a South Wales community in the seven days following the escape of sixty-seven officer-prisoners from Island Farm Camp, Bridgend, in February 1945, is described by Herbert Williams in his memoirs of the event, *Come Out Wherever You Are*.<sup>6</sup> This was followed by a dramatised documentary version of his account, *The Welsh Great Escape* (2002) - evidence of the popularity of stories concerning prisoner-of-war escapes and the romantic 'derring-do' of civilians in post-war culture generally.<sup>7</sup> Roderick De Normann's *For Führer and Fatherland* focuses attention on the uncovering by the British authorities of one of the most prominent, and elaborate, POW escape plots of the war, which took place at Le Marchant Camp, Devizes, Wiltshire in December 1944, and the subsequent murder by hard-core Nazi fanatics of the prisoner believed to have divulged the plot to British intelligence staff.<sup>8</sup> Using a variety of archival material, De Normann's

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<sup>5</sup> Miriam Kochan, *Prisoners of England* (London: Macmillan, 1980); Pamela Howe Taylor, *Enemies Become Friends: A True Story of German Prisoners of War* (Sussex: The Book Guild Ltd., 1998); *The Germans We Trusted: Stories of Friendship Resulting from the Second World War* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Herbert Williams, *Come Out, Wherever You Are: The Great Escape in Wales* (London: Quartet Books, 1976).

<sup>7</sup> Hartswood Films, *The Welsh Great Escape* (first shown on Channel Four in 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Roderick De Normann, *For Führer and Fatherland: Murder and Mayhem in Wartime Britain* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1996).

account provides insight into the politics of the prison camp and the inability through the lack of preparedness on the part of the British authorities to handle it effectively.

However, although these authors make some attempt to link events and experiences with government policy, none places policy formation as the centre of his or her study. This omission has been addressed to some extent in the works of Henry Faulk, S.P. Mackenzie and Bob Moore. As former head of the POW re-education programme in the UK, the first of these authors had been asked by the German government's Scientific Commission on the History of German POWs (*Die wissenschaftlichen Kommission für deutsche Kriegsgefangenengeschichte, 1962-1974*), under Professor Erich Maschke, to prepare a volume based on his experiences and findings.<sup>9</sup> The abridged English-language version of Faulk's study, *Group Captives: The Re-education of German Prisoners of War in Britain 1945-1948*, details the government's attempt to influence the group attitudes of the German prisoners of war who came to Britain during and after the war and compares its effectiveness in changing their political attitudes with that of other factors, including work and contact with British civilians. The conclusion reached is that re-education had no uniform effect on the prisoners and that changes in outlook depended on a variety of factors, most notably the predominant attitude of the 'inclusive group' of which the POW felt himself to be a part. Indeed, Faulk's is an informative and impressive study of the psychology of group belonging, which has no doubt informed all works written on the subjects since its publication in 1977.

S.P. Mackenzie's account of the shackling of German and Anglo-Canadian prisoners of war following the 1942 raid on Dieppe exposes the tit-for-tat mentality of high government officials under the extreme pressures of total war, in which every

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<sup>9</sup> H. Faulk, 'Die deutschen Kriegsgefangenen in Grossbritannien – Re-education', vol. X1, E.Maschke (ed.), *Zur Geschichte der deutschen Kriegsgefangenen des Zweiten Weltkrieges* (Munich, 1972-1974).

opportunity was taken to weaken the enemy, and highlights the fragility of international law in protecting POWs in cases where the principle of reciprocity is called into effect.<sup>10</sup> In another, comparative, work Mackenzie looks at the treatment of prisoners of war as a whole during the Second World War and considers what motivated individual states in their actions towards them.<sup>11</sup> He points out that although the Geneva Convention and the fear of reciprocity were important in limiting poor treatment, in cases where holding states were not party to the Convention, notably Russia and Japan, or where there was no possibility of retaliation, there were no effective restraints on captor behaviour and often abject cruelty resulted. Mackenzie concludes that, overall, the Second World War can be seen as a transitional phase which led the way to the treatment of POWs according to ideological considerations in later conflicts. Bob Moore has also written a comparative study, in which he offers a glimpse of the political and economic motivations underlying the formation of British policy towards German and Italian POWs between 1939 and 1945.<sup>12</sup> Focusing on four particular watersheds in the decision-making process, Moore concludes that policy was in large part determined by a combination of insecurity and a distorted view of the German and Italian national characters. This resulted, according to the author, in Britain's decision against retaining and employing German POWs in the UK until the late stages of the war, when she was forced to substitute them for Italian workers.

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<sup>10</sup> S.P. Mackenzie, 'The Shackling Crisis: A Case Study in the Dynamics of Prisoner-of-War Diplomacy', in *International History Review*, vol. XVII, no.1, February 1995.

<sup>11</sup> S.P. Mackenzie, 'The Treatment of Prisoners of War in World War II', in *Journal of Modern History*, vol.66, no. 3, 1994.

<sup>12</sup> Bob Moore, 'Turning Liabilities into Assets: British Government Policy Towards German and Italian Prisoners of War during the Second World War', in *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol.32, no.1, 1997, 117-136; 'Axis Prisoners in Britain during the Second World War: A Comparative Survey', in Bob Moore and Kent Fedorowich (eds.), *Prisoners of War and their Captors in World War II* (Oxford: Berg, 1996).

What has not, however, been explained in the existing literature is why Britain did not repatriate her German POWs at the end of the war, as had been the case after the 1914-18 conflict, but instead retained them in this country as a labour force until 1948. In order to account for this development, the present thesis surveys a number of decisions taken by the British government between 1940 and 1948, which shaped the policies adopted towards the prisoners. It considers as its central theme the extent to which Britain's treatment of German POWs during this period accorded with the standards laid down under international law, which were embodied in the Geneva Convention of 1929. What becomes apparent is the fact that, after May 1945, the question of legality in this respect was somewhat elusive, due primarily both to the wording of the Convention itself and the terms of Germany's unconditional surrender. In assessing Britain's conduct, therefore, it is essential first to review the terms of reference that were relied upon by officials when seeking to justify the government's actions *vis-à-vis* its German POWs.

Although Britain's interpretation of several of the Geneva Convention's articles is called to account during the course of this study, one aspect in particular, namely article 75, entitled 'Liberation and Repatriation at the end of Hostilities', raises a number of problems in terms of the question of legality. It stated:

When belligerents conclude an armistice convention, they shall normally cause to be included therein provisions concerning the repatriation of prisoners of war. If it has not been possible to insert in that convention such stipulations, the belligerents shall, nevertheless, enter into communication with each other on the question as soon as possible. In any case, the repatriation of prisoners shall be effected as soon as possible after the conclusion of peace.<sup>13</sup>

Although its title mentioned repatriation 'at the end of hostilities', the wording of the article itself was rather more ambiguous and, as a result, left considerable room for

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<sup>13</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross, *International Humanitarian Law - Treaties and Documents: Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War* (Geneva, 27 July 1929), article 75.

manoeuvre. For example, did the inclusion of the phrase 'as soon as possible after the conclusion of peace' imply that the POWs should be returned home after the laying down of arms, or that repatriation should follow the signing of a peace treaty? Of course, the POW Convention was formulated in light of the experiences of the First World War, and its authors did not foresee a situation arising which required the unconditional surrender of a defeated country and the loss of sovereignty that this eventually entailed. This, nevertheless, was the state of affairs in 1945.

For the Second World War to be formally terminated and a European peace established, the Allies had to sign a peace treaty with Germany. However, this was not possible because there was no German government with which to make peace: on 23 May 1945 members of the Reich government, reconstituted under Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz, were placed under arrest by the Allied powers. From that day on, the only way for a German government to come into being was by Allied permission, and, since ideological differences between the Allies meant that there was little or no possibility of returning authority to a German government that would be politically acceptable to all concerned, this was an unlikely eventuality. Thus, after May 1945, the Allies held political and administrative authority in Germany, a situation which was given legal sanction on 5 June 1945, when the United States, Britain and the Soviet Union issued the 'Declaration Regarding the Defeat of Germany and Assumption of Supreme Authority by Allied Powers'.<sup>14</sup> This authority, although fragmented according to ideological as well as geographical boundaries, continued to exist in its fullest sense until 1949, when the Federal Republic of (West) Germany and the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) came formally into existence on 21 September and 7 October respectively. However, it was not until the General Treaty

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<sup>14</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS): Diplomatic Papers. The Conferences at Malta and Yalta, 1945* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1976), 110.

was concluded with the Federal Republic and the three Western powers in May 1952 that sovereignty was wholly restored to West Germany, and the state of war brought officially to an end.<sup>15</sup>

In the meantime, and as a result of this prolonged process, Britain was able to hold on to her German prisoners of war and to justify legally her actions by claiming throughout that she was adhering to the Geneva Convention's requirement that they should be repatriated 'as soon as possible after the conclusion of peace'. Of course, whether one accepts this line of reasoning depends in the first instance on one's view of the legal context of the Allies' decision to abolish sovereign rule in Germany in 1945. It has been argued by the historian H.W. Koch that all Allied measures regarding Germany, from wartime plans for the occupation of the country, to reparations and de-Nazification, were '*res inter alios acta* – the Latin expression in international law for a procedure in which alien powers deal with a third power which has not offered its agreement, and therefore is not compelled to accept what has happened'.<sup>16</sup> In other words, the abolition of the Reich government and the imposition of four-power rule in Germany in 1945 was a violation of the principle of international law regarding 'non-interference in the domestic affairs of a sovereign state'. If we accept that the Allies acted illegally in 1945 in this respect, then it follows that Britain's retention of POWs until 1948 was also illegal.

However, at the time, of course, the Allies justified their actions on moral grounds: unleashing war in 1939, and in her subsequent conduct, Germany had put herself far beyond the bounds of international law. Hence, she was to be treated as a special case, and there was no question of her government's benefiting from the

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<sup>15</sup> Dennis L. Bark and David R. Gress, *A History of West Germany, Volume One: From Shadow to Substance 1945-1963* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 290.

<sup>16</sup> H.W. Koch, *A Constitutional History of Germany in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London: Longman, 1984), 316.

protection of that law.<sup>17</sup> Yet, while there might have been some validity in the moral argument, particularly from the perspective of 1945, the very point of international law is that civilised nations apply it even when dealing with their enemies. As Bark and Gress acknowledge, if such nations do not so apply it, thereby introducing a double standard, international law has little moral or political value.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, at best, the retention of German POWs in the UK after 1945 did not accord with the traditionally accepted rules of international law because essentially it did not have to: the moral superiority of the victor nations meant that they could override those rules and treat Germany and her people as they saw fit.

Already, it seems, the question of legality and Britain's conduct after 1945 poses a dilemma and creates confusion, to say the least. However, adding to this confusion is the fact that while the British government smugly claimed to be adhering to the Geneva Convention's rule regarding repatriation, on other occasions ministers were keen to point out that, since there was no German government to which Switzerland, as Protecting Power, could report after May 1945, the Geneva Convention regarding the treatment of German POWs no longer applied.<sup>19</sup> As the Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, announced in the House of Commons in March 1946:

Since the German Surrender it has not been possible to carry out the Geneva Conventions in all respects owing to situations having arisen which were never contemplated when they were drawn up, but His Majesty's Government continue to observe the spirit of the Conventions. There has been no protecting power since 14 May 1945, when the Swiss Government themselves withdrew from representing German interests.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The attitude of the three major Allied powers towards a post-war Germany is discussed in more detail in Chapter Two.

<sup>18</sup> Bark and Gress, *History of West Germany*, 58.

<sup>19</sup> The 'protecting powers', neutral states that function as diplomatic liaisons for one warring state within the territory of the other, are the primary monitors of the implementation of the agreement. Representatives from each protecting power are responsible for compiling lists of soldiers taken prisoner, conveying mail to and from POWs, and monitoring conditions in camps, including discipline of POWs, and must be given free rein to do these tasks by states holding POWs.

<sup>20</sup> Hansard HOC, 13 March 1946, col. 221

While the intention was therefore to treat the prisoners humanely, or, as the government's new catchphrase put it, according to the 'spirit of Geneva', the repudiation of the Convention meant that Britain no longer felt legally obliged to abide by its rules. No doubt the British government sought to protect itself from criticism by making sure that all possible options were covered. However, the manner in which it sought to justify the prolonged retention of German prisoners – on the one hand wanting to appear to be complying strictly with the Geneva Convention's wording, while on the other denying the Convention's relevance at all - seems, at least from a present-day perspective, to be glaringly contradictory. Even putting the elusive issue of legality to one side, what we may judge to have been the government's deliberate attempts at semantic subterfuge raise doubts about Britain's honesty and therefore her moral integrity in this matter.

The following chapters explore the various factors driving the British government's POW policies after 1940 and the problems it encountered while putting them into effect, particularly in the aftermath of Germany's surrender in 1945. Although, throughout, Britain's legal responsibility to the POWs proves hard to determine with any precision, consideration is given to these policies in light of her treaty obligations alongside other factors. From the outset, it becomes apparent that the treatment Britain afforded her German prisoners of war depended, not necessarily on her commitment to the Geneva Convention's rules, but rather on a complex combination of economic, political and psychological pressures. In 1940 all three of these elements came to bear on the government, influencing its decision to transport almost all German POWs falling into British hands across the Atlantic, particularly to Canada. Indeed, central to this decision was the fact that during this early stage in the war German prisoners were seen as likely to be a drain on Britain's financial and



material resources, while their potential as a pool of labour could not at that time be realised because manpower reserves in the UK were still sufficient to meet demand. In addition to these practical considerations, a keenly felt psychological motive underlay the deportation policy. By June 1940, Britain found herself confronted with the most threatening situation since the beginning of the war: British forces had been obliged to retreat from the beaches of Dunkirk, France had surrendered, and there was a fear that Britain also faced imminent invasion by the Germans. Shipping as many 'enemy aliens', including German civilians and POWs, as possible off to distant shores was therefore regarded as being essential to the maintenance of Britain's domestic security.

However, while the British government clearly considered its deportation policy to be justifiable given the circumstances prevailing in 1940, this approach appears to have made less sense as the war continued. By 1942 the economic climate in Britain had changed dramatically and there were acute shortages of labour in certain sectors of the economy, particularly in agriculture. However, rather than reversing its decision in order to facilitate the employment of German POWs to help make good these shortages, the government instead embarked on a policy of bringing Italian POWs to Britain for labour purposes. This disparity in official attitudes towards German and Italian prisoners resulted from a rather distorted view of the German and Italian national characters respectively: Germans were regarded as 'dangerous' opponents of democracy and thus as representing a risk not worth taking, while Italians were felt, by contrast, to be 'docile' and ideologically uncommitted. However, a consequence of this short-sightedness was that when Italy surrendered in September 1943, joining the Allies as a co-belligerent in the war against Germany, the continued use of POW workers was put in doubt. As will be shown, the government was forced,

out of economic as well as practical necessity, to reconsider its POW policy and, by the end of 1944, had begun to replace Italian prisoners with their German counterparts.

The latitude which allowed Britain to retain her existing German POWs and to increase their number further after 1945 derived from war-time decisions taken by the major Allied powers, namely the United States, Britain and the Soviet Union, on the political organisation of the post-war world and, in particular, on the question of 'what to do with Germany'. Their collaboration, which led to the establishment of the United Nations Organisation in 1942, ensured the dominance of the Big Three in the decision-making process and the general acceptance, at least in their respective countries, of their right to determine Germany's future. Of course, the arrogation to themselves of this right by the Allies was based on the premise that the German people were morally inferior and, as such, could not be trusted to make their own arrangements. The terms of unconditional surrender were therefore designed to allay any fear that Germany might again wage war in the future. For the German soldiers captured at the end of the war, however, the terms of surrender had important implications: they were now subject to the will of the Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Forces, who could declare them to be prisoners of war or otherwise, as he saw fit. The second chapter of the thesis, therefore, considers the motivation behind the US and British decision in 1945 to confer on thousands of prisoners taken at the surrender the status of Disarmed Enemy Soldiers (DEFs) and Surrendered Enemy Personnel (SEPs), and the question of whether or not this action actually released Britain from her obligation, both legal and moral, to treat them according to the Geneva Convention's requirements.

From as early as 1941 British government officials began to consider what, if any, reparations demand should be made on Germany after the war. A primary concern was that the mistakes of the recent past should be avoided, and that whatever was demanded by the Allies should be within Germany's capacity to pay. However, as the war progressed it became clear that the Soviet Union was likely to make the most exorbitant claim for reparations. Forced to find a solution to the problem which would satisfy both Russian demands and Britain's desire for reparations whilst at the same time endangering the latter's long-term economic security as little as possible, government officials proposed that Germany should pay 'in kind' rather than in currency and that part of this payment should be in German manpower. Hence, the term 'labour reparations' entered frequently into formal discussions; all that was now required was to persuade Stalin to forgo a substantial part of his demand for German plant and materials in exchange for labour services.

Attention is, therefore, given to Britain's efforts to bring labour reparations firmly onto the agenda during Allied discussions. However, while it became apparent, particularly during the Yalta Conference in February 1945, that the Soviets intended to take as many German labourers as they could anyway, in addition to their reparations demands, and that Stalin would not make any compromises, Britain continued to go to great lengths to give her proposal detailed content. Ultimately, this was to no avail since provision for labour reparations was not included in any inter-Allied agreement. Nevertheless, undeterred, Britain embarked on her own policy of seeking reparations in the form of German prisoner-of-war labour.

In practical terms, the policy posed a number of problems: for example, how many reparations labourers could Britain possibly acquire and would these be sufficient to meet manpower demands in this country? Would the Control

Commission for Germany (British Element) be able to retain enough prisoners on the Continent until transportation became available? What conditions would the prisoners have to endure while waiting to be sent to Britain? Which prisoners would be deemed suitable for reparations labour, and, moreover, what impact would this policy have on Germany? The manner in which Britain addressed these difficult questions is the focus of discussion in chapter four. What emerges is that the practicalities involved in the exercise had not been given enough prior consideration by British officials and that as a result the success of the policy came to depend on a series of ad hoc decisions taken in response to situations as they arose. The consequences of these decisions for many of the POWs also make it clear that humanitarian and moral concerns were secondary in importance to the manpower requirements of post-war Britain.

The acceptance of this situation by the new Labour government in 1945 is surprising in view of the Labour Party's commitment to the principles of Socialism. Indeed, one might have expected it to reject a policy essentially involving deportation and involuntary labour. However, it is the case that during the war the Labour Party, too, had included labour reparations in its proposals for a post-war settlement with Germany. These proposals, set forth in *The International Post-war Settlement* (1944), were, it is argued here, the product of the anti-German sentiment that existed among members of Labour's political elite, and, when they became incorporated in the government's policy after 1945, led to struggles within the Party and the wider Labour movement.<sup>21</sup> One cause for concern was that the availability of cheap POW labour might have detrimental consequences for the economic position of British workers. The government struggled to reconcile conflicting interests, seeking to

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<sup>21</sup> Report by the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party, *The International Post-War Settlement* (June 1944).

satisfy at one and the same time the demands of workers, who often felt aggrieved at having to compete with the prisoners for jobs, of employers, who naturally wanted to keep POW wages at a low level, and, in addition, of the POWs themselves, good morale among whom was regarded by officials as essential to the maintenance of high levels of productivity. Inevitably, it proved impossible to disentangle this web of competing demands, and, in trying to allay the fears of everyone, the government succeeded in satisfying no one. The fifth chapter of this thesis, therefore, considers the employment of German POWs in Britain after 1945 in the light of Labour's commitment to improving the lives of the working class generally. It shows that Attlee's government made considerable ethical compromises in its endeavour to deliver its social promises by improving the material conditions of post-war Britain. Indeed, contemporary critics pointed to what appeared to be the contradiction between the ideas of Socialism, the humanitarianism embodied in the Nuremberg Charter, which was being formulated by the Allies in 1945, and the continued, and, as some would have it illegal, use of German POWs as reparations, or 'slave', labour.

Although German POWs were regarded first and foremost as a valuable supplementary labour force, British government officials also recognised their potential as a democratising force once they returned home. From 1944 on, plans were drawn up for a programme involving the political screening and classification of prisoners and for the subsequent implementation of a policy of re-educating them in western democratic principles. In Britain, of course, until the war was over this policy could not be put into effect, due to the fact that there were so few German POWs in the country. In the meantime, the task was left to the Canadian and United States authorities to attempt, and, as will be shown, they did so with varying degrees of commitment and success. When the process of re-education began in earnest in the

UK in 1945, many problems became apparent: there was not a sufficient number of reliable, qualified staff to interrogate the prisoners and 'teach' them lessons in democracy; many POWs were cynical about a political system that espoused personal freedom and civil liberty while, as they saw it, holding them prisoners in disregard of the Geneva Convention's requirements; and, as Henry Faulk acknowledged, there was a general lack of understanding on the part of British administrative personnel about what National Socialism had meant to the prisoners, in terms of the value they placed on it as a social and economic as well as political system, which resulted in confusion at grass-roots level over what re-education was eventually meant to achieve. Chapter six examines these problems and attempts an evaluation of Britain's policy of re-educating POWs between 1945 and 1948. It shows that the government persisted with re-education throughout the period despite the fact that it had not resulted in the political conversion of the prisoners, which would seem to indicate that officials' aims in this endeavour had shifted somewhat. In order to arrive at an understanding of what these revised aims were, re-education is set within the broader framework of Britain's post-war foreign policy. This leads to the conclusion that for Britain the importance of the policy was not to be found in its role as a democratising tool, but rather in its potential, in a Cold War environment, to encourage the development of specifically western values. The hope, no doubt, was that ultimately the prisoners and, of course, the German people in general, would turn to the West rather than towards the Soviet Union for political guidance.

The final part of the thesis appropriately considers the policy of repatriation. As already mentioned, the government's fluctuating commitment to the Geneva Convention after 1945 meant that it had called into question its obligation to return the prisoners according to any legally prescribed timetable. Consequently, and with

little consideration for the prisoners themselves, officials initially neglected to draw up a schedule at all. Certainly, there appears to have been no incentive to do so in the early post-war months: Britain was, after all, concerned with increasing, not reducing, her POW workforce, and, in the heated atmosphere of 1945, there was little public sympathy for the prisoners and no pressure for their repatriation. However, by 1946 there was evidence of a swing in the public mood. The government, forced to respond to the humanitarian outcry of the British people, eventually agreed on a scheme of release and, from September 1946, around 15,000 prisoners began to be sent home each month. Many of the difficult questions that arose between 1946 and 1948 in the course of this debate are considered in chapter seven. It is there shown that once again the government faced the problem of coming up with a proposal that would satisfy both moral and economic requirements. Of course, the outcome proved to be a shaky compromise, since these interests were impossible to reconcile: a rate of repatriation that was acceptable to the moral campaigners and the prisoners would not be welcomed by the government and the employers who were dependent on prisoner labour. The fact that Britain 'hedged her bets' by not acting decisively in favour of the moral argument, in other words, by not returning her POWs as soon as possible after the war, cannot be said to redound to her credit. Yet, viewed overall, the subject-matter of this thesis may serve to illustrate the dilemmas that arose from the Second World War and its aftermath for one moderately respectable democracy, namely, Great Britain.

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Employment of Prisoners of War in Britain Before 1945

While there are certain disadvantages, in terms of the cost and general maintenance, in holding prisoners of war, these, as recent history has shown, can be offset by the economic advantages which can be gleaned from their use as a labour source since, as Gerald H. Davies pointed out in his 1977 study, 'Prisoners of War in Twentieth Century Economies', 'when soldiers surrender they take their muscles and brains with them'.<sup>1</sup> Although there were only approximately 150 such prisoners in Britain when the British Government was considering this issue in October and early November 1939, as those deemed fit for work had been retained in France for labour purposes, officials could reflect upon the degree to which the main belligerents had exploited this resource during the First World War and the benefits gained as a result.<sup>2</sup> Then the agricultural sector had been the main user of POW labour. Although only a few thousand German prisoners were put to work on British farms during the course of 1917 and 1918, France by the end of the conflict had employed 500,000.<sup>3</sup> At the same time 900,000 Russian prisoners in Germany and over 1,000,000 in Austria-Hungary were employed to harvest crops.<sup>4</sup> The coal mining industries of Russia and Germany also benefited considerably from the use of POW labour. In the former, for example, German and Austro-Hungarian POWs constituted a staggering one third of

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald H. Davies, 'Prisoners of War in Twentieth-Century War Economies', in *Journal of Contemporary History*, 12 (1977), 623-634.

<sup>2</sup> TNA: PRO MAF47/54, agenda for a meeting between the Ministry of Agriculture and the War Office, 21 November 1939.

<sup>3</sup> Gerald H. Davies, 'Prisoners of War in Twentieth Century War Economies', 628-629.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



all men employed in that sector of the economy.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the period had exposed more than any other the economic potential of prisoners of war, as well as their vulnerability to exploitation by the captor states.

This was a situation from which the existing international agreement, the Hague Convention Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land of 1907, in its one brief article on POW labour, offered little protection.<sup>6</sup> Of course, the agreement had been drafted during a period as yet untouched by the extremities of a world war in which between seven and eight million enemy prisoners would be taken worldwide.<sup>7</sup> Not surprisingly the experience of 1914-1918 led to an international reappraisal of the rules governing the conduct of war and the next major agreement on the issue, the Geneva Convention of 1929, which was ratified by thirty-four states. Considerable attention was now paid, in particular, to the rules surrounding the treatment of prisoners of war, with the seventeen articles of the 1907 Hague Convention on the issue being replaced by a total of ninety-seven covering, at least what seemed at the time to be, every conceivable aspect of POW welfare, from the practical aspects to general rules of protection. In terms of their employment it was no longer considered sufficient to state that it should not be 'excessive' and have 'no connection with the operations of the war'. While these rules were integral to the Geneva Convention, the new code stressed above all the humanitarian role of the captor state. Prisoners now had to be physically suited to the task in hand and limits were placed on the hours they could work and the types of work deemed suitable, which not only excluded war work but also 'unhealthy or dangerous work'. Moreover, Article 27 offered prisoners certain legal rights including their ability to appeal to the protecting Power in the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> *The Hague Convention Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land, IV (18 October 1907)*, Chapter II, Article 6, 'Prisoners of War'.

<sup>7</sup> Gerald H. Davies, 'Prisoners of War in Twentieth Century War Economies', 623.

event of abuses occurring and the right to claim compensation for injuries sustained at work. Agreeing to the terms set out in the Geneva Convention therefore provided participating states with a public means of accepting and understanding their obligation towards POWs during wartime. This commitment, together with the more informal understanding of reciprocity – the idea that captor states tend to treat POWs humanely and abide by the rules in order to ensure the fair treatment of their own soldiers in enemy hands – meant, in theory at least, that POWs would not be exploited for their labour in any future conflict.

It therefore seems surprising, given that the British government understood the advantages gained in holding enemy prisoners during the First World War, was now in possession of a new and more comprehensive framework for their organisation, and had already established camps in preparation, that in May and June 1940 it embarked on a radical plan involving the large scale deportation of German prisoners of war overseas, specifically to Canada. This decision, which effectively kept German POWs off mainland Britain until 1944, was, it shall be argued here, influenced by a complex set of issues facing Britain during this period, including the nation's manpower requirements, the viability of holding these men in the country during a period of material scarcity, as well as the official line which gave an almost irrational yet, in the atmosphere of June 1940, deeply felt psychological element to the decision – the preservation of domestic security. Indeed, the government's concerns regarding the retention of prisoners of war were summed up in a Foreign Office memorandum, which expressed its determination to 'get rid of as many *useless* (and *dangerous*) *mouths* as possible'.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> TNA: PRO FO916/258, Foreign Office memorandum, 2 July 1940. (My italics).

One of the practical concerns, which was no doubt on the minds of those making the decision, was that at this stage in the war the usefulness of prisoners as a source of labour was limited to say the least. This was because up until as late as April 1940, eight months after the beginning of the war, the number of regular unemployed British workers remained above a million, despite the call up of one and a half million for military service. Although there were shortages of skilled workers, these were typically needed in industries directly associated with the war effort, which, under the terms of the Geneva Convention, were prohibited from employing prisoners of war. Of course in 'total war' the idea that any type of work is not connected in some way to the war effort is difficult to maintain. Nevertheless, agriculture, despite its vital importance, was not considered a war industry. Its potential as an employer of POWs could not be realised in 1940, however, since the first half of that year had witnessed a drop in demand for agricultural labourers.

In 1939 the government's response to shortages of manpower on the land, which had steadily declined in the 1920s and 1930s by approximately thirty per cent of its pre-1914 figure, had been to sanction not only the use of the army to bring in the harvest, but also the introduction of the Women's Land Army (WLA).<sup>9</sup> However, bad weather during the autumn/winter of 1939-40 curtailed demand for labour, the outcome of which was that by February 1940 there were as many as 50,000 registered unemployed agricultural workers and 1,400 trained WLA workers for whom places could not be found.<sup>10</sup> Eventually many of these were lost to the armed forces or were absorbed by industry as the war effort picked up pace and, when a shortfall in labour requirements to bring in the 1940 harvest was predicted later that year, the Minister of Labour, Ernest Bevin, was forced in June to prevent a further drift into industry by

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<sup>9</sup> Keith A.H. Murray, *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Civil Series: Agriculture* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office & Longmans, Green & Co., 1955), 38.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

introducing the Restriction on Engagement Order, forbidding other industries to engage men who had previously been employed on the land, while attempting to attract workers back to farming by offering to increase pay from 37s to 48s per week. But, with industrial wages set considerably higher than those in agriculture, at around 80s per week, the measures had little positive effect.<sup>11</sup> The alternative, however, of agreeing to the request received from the Ministry of Agriculture for the allocation of POW labour would not only have undermined the Ministry of Labour's efforts to recruit British workers but would also, no doubt, have aroused opposition from the trade unions, particularly the Agricultural Workers' Union, who would have seen the step as jeopardising their prospects of securing further improvements in pay and conditions. Bevin, at least initially, had to tread carefully. After all, he would have been mindful of the fact that he had been chosen for the position of Minister of Labour because of his powerful influence in the Labour movement before the war. Between 1921 and 1940 Bevin held the position of General Secretary of the largest and most powerful trade union, the Transport and General Workers' Union, and had also, since 1925, been a leading member of the General Council of the TUC, a position he continued to hold after his appointment in 1940. As a result he was recognised by Churchill and other War Cabinet Ministers as a formidable force, who was expected to win the support of the workers and not provoke them into opposing government measures so early in the war effort.

Consequently, for the first half of 1940, at least, there was a reluctance to impose radical changes in the way the manpower situation in Britain was handled, as well as a general lack of confidence on the government's part in the willingness of the British people to accept them. Moreover, since statistically there did not appear to be an

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 83.

overall shortage of labour in the country at this stage in the war, the government no doubt felt more comfortable continuing along the path that it had followed for the past twenty years, which meant relying on 'the natural flow of economic forces' to meet demand.<sup>12</sup> As Alan Bullock comments, in 1940, 'the idea that the time would come when the lack ...of any more men to be drafted into the services and industry would set the final limits to the British war efforts was as unfamiliar as the idea that Britain would ever be short of coal.'<sup>13</sup> However, as time would tell, the result of this lack of foresight was that labour 'naturally flowed' into the war industries, which offered better pay and conditions, and the agricultural work force continued to dwindle.

While believing that there was no use for their 'muscles' at this particular stage in the war, the prospect of feeding and maintaining an unknown quantity of redundant German POWs according to the requirements set out in the Geneva Convention was a daunting one. This stipulated, among other things, that 'the food ration of prisoners of war shall be equivalent in quantity and quality to that of the depot troops' (Article 11), which in Britain at that time amounted to approximately 3,300 calories per day.<sup>14</sup> Such a high level of subsistence would have placed unwanted pressure on the financial and material resources of the country at a time when food supplies in Britain were barely sufficient to satisfy her own population. Indeed, the war had, by the beginning of 1940, affected the level of imported British foodstuffs to the point where it had been reduced by one third of its 1939 figure.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, with rationing on some essential items (bacon, ham, sugar, butter, meat, tea, margarine and cooking fat) already underway by July, the government, by retaining prisoners of war, would have run the risk of provoking a sense of injustice on the domestic front.

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<sup>12</sup> Alan Bullock, *The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin: Volume Two, Minister of Labour 1940-1945* (London: Heineman, 1967), 9.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>14</sup> TNA: PRO WO32/11689, table of rations given to British troops and prisoners of war, 1940.

<sup>15</sup> Keith Murray, *History of the Second World War: Agriculture*, 152.

Furthermore, the cost of such an enterprise would surely have given cause for wider concern. After all, throughout the course of 1940 the British Foreign Office was negotiating with the United States to secure material assistance in order to stay in the war: the Lend Lease Agreement, which was eventually finalised on 11 March 1941, was of mutual benefit to both countries and accepted by the latter, according to one commentator, 'on the view that the best defence of Great Britain was also the best defence of the United States'.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the US government had defended its decision to an anxious electorate by playing on fears that a German invasion of Great Britain would be detrimental to their own national security – Britain was a 'good risk' and worth helping. Therefore, the British government had to avoid jeopardising the negotiations by bringing into the equation not only the additional, and what seemed unnecessary, expense of holding prisoners of war on British soil, but also the potential risk that their presence would pose to US as well as British security.

These things considered, the decision to deport German POWs in 1940 was officially justified on the grounds of maintaining British domestic security. Following the Dunkirk evacuation of May 1940, and the end of the 'Phoney War' in Europe, there was a heightened concern that Britain was herself open to invasion. Reports of spies and the dangers of a fifth column were published in the press and on 30 May a series of questions was raised in the House of Commons about the wisdom of retaining German POWs when there was a serious risk of their being liberated and forming a fighting force on British soil.<sup>17</sup> This attitude, of course, conformed with the general anti-alien sentiments that had been expressed in official circles since the outbreak of the war, when the Home Office embarked on the screening of more than

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<sup>16</sup> Sir Llewellyn Woodward, *British Foreign Policy in the Second World War* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1962), 90.

<sup>17</sup> TNA: PRO FO916/25, House of Commons questions from Roland Robinson and James Henderson Stewart, 30 May 1940.

73,000 Germans and Austrians all over Britain.<sup>18</sup> The majority of these were refugees, some were long established residents and others had simply been passing through the UK on their way to other countries when war broke out. Few, therefore, were likely to have posed a threat to British security. Nevertheless, over the following months they were all placed into one of three categories: category A was for those considered a security risk; category C was for those whose political reliability was not in doubt, while category B was an intermediate one for those whose records did not justify either of the other categories. Initially, the government interned only one per cent of those screened, the majority, 64,200, falling into category C.<sup>19</sup> However, when Britain's position in the war markedly deteriorated in April 1940, with the German occupation of Denmark and Norway, the War Office demanded that more rigorous measures be taken. At the same time, the Rothermere and the Kemsley presses began to turn their readers against the refugees. Articles that appeared in the *Daily Mail* and *Sunday Chronicle* are typical examples of this type of agitation:

Act! Act! Act! Do It Now! ... All refugees from Austria, Germany and Czechoslovakia, men and women alike, should be drafted without delay to a remote part of the country and kept under strict supervision.<sup>20</sup>

Round up every enemy alien. However much he or she may profess to hate the Nazi regime the ties of the Fatherland [Germany] prove to be the temptation to betray us.<sup>21</sup>

Such reportage succeeded in stirring up an extremely negative and fearful public mood to the point where, according to a confidential memorandum by the Ministry of Information, refugee committees were disturbed by the increasingly anti-Semitic

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<sup>18</sup> The National Council for Civil Liberties, *The Internment and Treatment of Aliens*, May 1941, 3. In all 73,400 aliens were examined by 120 tribunals.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Seyfert, 'His Majesty's Most Loyal Internees' in Gerhard Hirschfeld (ed.), *Exile in Great Britain: Refugees from Hitler's Germany* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1984), 166.

<sup>20</sup> *The Daily Mail*, 20 April 1940, cited in *ibid.*, 168.

<sup>21</sup> *Sunday Chronicle*, 12 May 1940 cited in Fiona Reynoldson, *The Home Front 1939-1945: Prisoners of War* (Hove: Wayland Publishers Ltd., 1990), 9.

attitudes which they could observe among the general population.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, The National Council for Civil Liberties also reported that attacks in the press had been followed by a campaign throughout the country on the part of local authorities to remove from their employ not only refugees but also British subjects with non-British parents.<sup>23</sup> It was argued that even the Red Cross, whose international committee was charged with the responsibility of protecting the rights of German POWs under the Geneva Convention, had dismissed such people from their employ.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, it must have seemed to many, particularly to the refugees themselves, that it had become socially acceptable in Britain to be anti-refugee.

Not surprisingly, when anti-alien sentiments coupled with uncertainty intensified in Britain following the Dunkirk evacuation, Churchill made the announcement that he was 'strongly in favour of removing all internees out of the United Kingdom'.<sup>25</sup> Within weeks the Cabinet made the decision to implement a policy of mass internment, and the Home Defence Security Executive (HDSE) was established to deal with the whole question of aliens, including prisoners of war, whose retention in Britain would have been particularly difficult to justify in the prevailing atmosphere. Following negotiations, the HDSE received confirmation on 14 June 1940 that Canada would admit 2,633 German internees in category A, 1,823 POWs and 1,500 pro-fascist Italians.<sup>26</sup> Three days later representatives from the War Office, the Foreign Office, the Canadian High Commission and MI5 participated in a conference on the movement of POWs and internees to Canada at which details were discussed

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<sup>22</sup> Michael Seyfert, 'His Majesty's Most Loyal Internees', 168.

<sup>23</sup> The National Council for Civil Liberties, *The Internment and Treatment of Aliens*, 4.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> TNA: PRO CAB65/7/WM137/94011, 24 May 1940.

<sup>26</sup> TNA: PRO FO916/2581, memorandum by the Canadian High Commission, 14 June 1940.



such as numbers, sailing dates, security measures and co-operation with the Canadian authorities upon arrival.<sup>27</sup>

While the deportation arrangements were being established, the British government recognised that public support for the policy would be essential, and that this support could only be ensured by increasing suspicion and heightening the sense of insecurity in the country even further. In May 1940 the BBC had already been instructed to abandon the separation, in propaganda terms, of the German people from Nazism in its broadcasting.<sup>28</sup> However, towards the end of June, the Ministry of Information set out a proposal for a more thoroughgoing 'Anger Campaign', whose main theme was the generation of 'resentment at the unchanging character of the German as the perpetual trouble-making BULLY OF THE WORLD'.<sup>29</sup> Revealing of the mood that gripped propagandists at the time, this incredible twenty-nine-page document provided a clear plan to correct contemporary attitudes, which, it was felt, 'were not at present directed consciously against the Germans.' 'It is our task', said the Ministry, 'to focus all war anger as directly as possible against the Germans and in such a way that it appears to come quite spontaneously from the people themselves.' It proposed to do this through a combination of provocative images and language, to be used in newspapers, posters, cartoons, radio broadcasts, film and even shop window displays, which was calculated to produce anger and contempt towards the German people. Suggested press headlines for the broad mass of readers included: 'The Recurring Madness Of The German People' and 'German Lust For World Domination', while the 'sophisticated and educated classes' were to be fed more 'factual' reportage under headlines such as, 'The Fundamental Rottenness of the German Mind' and 'German Character – Historical Analysis'.

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<sup>27</sup> Michael Seyfert, 'His Majesty's Most Loyal Internees', 174.

<sup>28</sup> TNA: PRO INF1/848, 2 May 1940, minutes of a Policy Committee meeting.

<sup>29</sup> TNA: PRO INF 1/849, 'Anger Campaign', 25 June 1940.

When, on 21 June 1940, the first consignment of deportees left for Canada on board the *Duchess of York*, the press conformed to the MOI's guidelines. Although there were 1,200 civilian internees on the voyage emphasis was placed on the 'loutish' behaviour of some of the 500 German prisoners of war also present, who reportedly 'behaved exactly as one might expect of their breed'.<sup>30</sup> Complaints focussed on the hostile attitude of the prisoners towards the guards on board, despite there being no indication that the POWs constituted an actual physical danger. On the contrary, according to a number of complaints received from prisoners who had been on the voyage, which were for the attention of the Consul General of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Switzerland, the opposite had in fact been the case. For example, two German POWs, Colonel George Friemel and Dr. Dietrich Fischer-Wingendorff, who were interned at a camp in Gravenhurst, Ontario, after their arrival in Canada, submitted detailed accounts of the crossing and the many hardships they had had to endure, which they understood to be in contravention of the Geneva Convention's rules.<sup>31</sup> Among their complaints was that due to the ship being severely overcrowded, passengers were forced to sleep in gangways with no mattresses or blankets; sanitary conditions were abysmal; medical treatment of the wounded was almost non-existent due to a lack of medical equipment and supplies; and, as well as food rations being insufficient, the preparation of meals was far from hygienic. In addition, the prisoners described numerous cases of violence and insults against the German soldiers, the most serious of which was a shooting incident which had resulted in the death of one and the wounding of ten others at the hands of an over-zealous British guard. The Dominions Office in London naturally expressed embarrassment that such a bad report, even allowing for exaggeration, should have

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<sup>30</sup> TNA: PRO FO916/2581, extract from the *Manchester Evening Chronicle*, 3 July 1940.

<sup>31</sup> TNA: PRO FO916/2581, complaint attached to a letter from Vincent Massey, High Commissioner for Canada, London, to the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, 5 August 1940.

been passed on to the Canadian Prime Minister at such an early stage in the deportation process.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, it seems that it was singularly ineffective in preventing such abuses occurring in the future, and prisoners continued throughout to flag similar incidents involving poor treatment during their journey to Canada to the Swiss protecting Power.<sup>33</sup>

Internees were also later to comment on the crossing to Canada. It seems that little consideration had been given to the possibility that friction would arise from their close proximity to prisoners of war and no measures were implemented to segregate them on board to avoid incidents occurring. For the German officers on board *The Duchess of York*, being expected to live alongside 'jews, emigrants, communists, traitors to their country and other dark elements' was regarded as a systematic offence to their honour.<sup>34</sup> However, the situation was totally demoralising for the civilian internees, who felt that the British regarded them as no better than the Nazis, from whom the majority had fled during the 1930s. Their indignation, moreover, was further increased by the attitude of and treatment meted out by the British guards. According to testimony recorded by Michael Seyfert, and contrary to that given by some of the German POWs on board, many of the guards expressed an 'undisguised sympathy' for the German soldiers whilst treating the civilian detainees in a hostile and threatening manner.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, following a number of deportation voyages, many internees even complained that during searches the authorities on board the vessels had stolen their personal possessions.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> LAC RG25/2779 621-EK-40, series of POW complaints forwarded by Royal Canadian Mounted Police to the Under Secretary of State for External Affairs, Ottawa, 15 December 1942.

<sup>34</sup> TNA: PRO FO916/2581, see fn. 32.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Seyfert, 'Her Majesty's Most Loyal Internees', 176.

<sup>36</sup> LAC RG25/2767 621-AV-40, minutes of a meeting of the Canadian Treasury Board, 10 July 1942.

Such testimony serves to highlight the fact that the internment and deportation of 'aliens' had been a panic measure on the part of the British government, since there had been no time to establish separate rules governing their treatment. Indeed, civilian internees were in a relatively vulnerable position compared to prisoners of war who were afforded the protection of the Geneva Convention. The Canadian government had agreed, 'as a matter of policy', to apply the Convention to civilian internees.<sup>37</sup> However, its articles concerning the treatment of POWs offered no guidelines on how the authorities should respond to problems uniquely associated with civilian internment. The main problem arose from the fact that while the Canadian government had only agreed with Britain to accept category A internees, who were considered to be dangerous, over half of those actually received were in the B and C categories. It appeared to the Canadian Prime Minister, W.L. Mackenzie-King, that these people had been 'shoved out without much discrimination' by the British, on the principle that all internees were dangerous and were therefore better out of the country.<sup>38</sup> As a result, Canada was faced with a situation she had not contemplated. Although arrangements had been made for POWs and civilian internees to be placed in separate camps, there were no plans in place, and certainly no accommodation available, to separate internees further according to category. The inevitable outcome was that the approximately 2000 'friendly aliens' who had arrived in Canada, including many Jewish refugees, had to share camp accommodation with 'enemy aliens'. This situation continued for months after their arrival, and when the task of separating them began it was often the case that hundreds were put into make-shift,

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<sup>37</sup> LAC RG25/2770 621-CA-40, correspondence from Lt.Col. H.N. Streight, Commissioner of Internment Operations, Ottawa, to the Department of External Affairs (DEA), 3 September 1942.

<sup>38</sup> LAC RG25 A-2 824/713, reel T2207, memorandum by W.L. Mackenzie-King, 30 July 1940.

tented shelter until more permanent sites could be found.<sup>39</sup> Not surprisingly, therefore, the conditions surrounding civilian internment were often far from ideal, and many, especially those in the category A camps, tended to appeal against them by referring the authorities to the Geneva Convention's rules. However, the refugees refused in writing to receive the Swiss Consul General as representative of the protecting Power, because they felt compelled to protect their status as refugees, as distinct from prisoners of war.<sup>40</sup> Instead, and to no avail, they hoped that through their protests a special legal basis would be created for their treatment, which would provide the opportunity to eliminate any deficiencies, as the Geneva Convention had been designed to do for the German POWs. Ultimately, following complaints of abuse and about the policy of civilian internment generally, the whole issue was reappraised by the British government.<sup>41</sup> In October 1940, the Home Office sent a Commissioner, Alexander Paterson, to Canada to consider what steps should be taken there. It was decided that civilian internees would be recruited, on a voluntary basis, for the Pioneer Corps and that applications for their release and return to Britain would be processed without delay. Nevertheless, due to a shortage of available ships, hundreds had to remain in the camps for months after, some even until the end of 1942.<sup>42</sup>

The internment of civilians in Canada had placed considerable strain on relations between the British and Canadian governments, which would continue to be felt for the duration of the war, and beyond, with regard to German POWs. The main area of concern for the Canadian government was its position of responsibility *vis-à-vis* the German prisoners it was holding. In financial terms, Britain had agreed to pay costs

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<sup>39</sup> LAC RG25/2770 621-CA-40, correspondence from Lt.-Col. H.N. Streight to the DEA, 3 September 1942.

<sup>40</sup> LAC RG25 A-2 824/723, reel T2207, memorandum from the Secretary of State for External Affairs to Canadian Legation, Washington, 11 March 1941.

<sup>41</sup> Michael Seyfert, 'His Majesty's Most Loyal Internees', 178-9. Three White Papers were published which led to the release of 8,700 internees held in Britain and the British Isles by January 1941.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

incurred in the transport and maintenance of POWs and to pay the officers.<sup>43</sup> Canada, on the other hand, would pay for the prisoners' labour as well as the maintenance and cost of administrative staff working in the POW camps.<sup>44</sup> However, in terms of responsibility for the actual treatment of the prisoners, and any repercussions that might generate from it, the situation was rather vague, and there were constant 'difficulties in communication' between the two countries on the issue.<sup>45</sup> A major bone of contention, as far as Canada was concerned, was that while Britain considered herself to be the detaining power in relation to the German prisoners in Canada, and therefore in a position of control, she also wanted a system of joint responsibility, whereby all Commonwealth countries would be held accountable for all enemy POWs in the Commonwealth. Indeed, in 1941 the British government went to considerable effort to reinforce this sense of shared responsibility by setting up an inter-governmental POW committee, which later became known as the Imperial POW Committee, under the chairmanship of the Secretary of State for War, whose aim was to create a united front of British and Dominion governments in negotiation with the Axis authorities in POW matters.<sup>46</sup> However, this whole issue raised concerns for the Canadian government, which feared that its own prisoners in enemy hands might suffer reprisals for the mistreatment of German POWs by, for example, Britain or Australia. Consequently it objected to the concept of joint responsibility and advocated instead an arrangement whereby individual dominions would have separate responsibility for the prisoners in their charge.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, despite its significance,

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<sup>43</sup> LAC RG25/2766 621-AE-40, War Office memorandum, 24 June 1940.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> LAC RG25 A-2 824/713, reel T2207, memorandum by the Secretary of State for External Affairs, 2 August 1940.

<sup>46</sup> David Rolf, 'The British Government and POWs in Germany, 1939-1945', in Bob Moore and Kent Fedorowich (eds.), *Prisoners of War and their Captors in World War II* (Oxford: Berg, 1996), 47-67.

<sup>47</sup> LAC RG25/2776 A-3-B 621-X-46, memorandum from Canadian High Commission, London, May 1943.

the problem was never fully resolved, which meant that important decisions regarding the treatment of German prisoners in Canada had to be dealt with on an ad hoc basis between the British and Canadian authorities.<sup>48</sup>

The friction that so often existed between the two governments on this issue of POW responsibility was particularly noticeable towards the end of 1942 during what has since been referred to as the 'shackling crisis', involving the tit-for-tat manacling of British, Canadian and German POWs.<sup>49</sup> It had been instigated by British actions during the Anglo-Canadian raid on the French port of Dieppe in August 1942, when the decision had been taken to tie together the hands of German prisoners of war in order to prevent them from escaping. When news of this treatment fell into German hands the German High Command made a public announcement to the effect that, unless the British government made a full apology, all Canadian and British prisoners taken at Dieppe would be shackled. Churchill, however, refused to concede to this demand and warned the German government that if it persisted in carrying out the threat, Britain would impose similar measures upon an equal number of POWs. On 9 October, Germany announced that 1,376 Canadian and British prisoners were wearing manacles and promised to multiply this figure threefold if any further action was taken against German POWs. The refusal of both sides to back down led to reprisals being followed by counter-reprisal and by 10 October 5,500 Canadian, British and German prisoners of war were wearing manacles.<sup>50</sup>

The escalating crisis was particularly worrying for the Canadian government. After all, the majority of prisoners in chains in Germany were Canadian, which meant

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<sup>48</sup> LAC RG25/2777 621-DM-40, 'Responsibility as Detaining Power for Enemy Prisoners of War, Channel of Communication Regarding Prisoners of War and Re-organisation of Imperial Prisoner of War Committee', 19 April 1943.

<sup>49</sup> S.P. Mackenzie, 'The Shackling Crisis: A Case-Study in the Dynamics of Prisoner-of-War Diplomacy in the Second World War', in *The International History Review*, vol. XVII, no.1, February 1995, 78-98.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

that there was a genuine concern for their well being and also the worry that the Canadian public would become agitated if an early resolution of the matter was not reached. In addition, since the majority of Britain's German POWs were held in Canada it was the Canadian authorities who ultimately had the difficult task of translating Churchill's defiant words into action. Indeed, in the first instance, the Canadian government found that it was not in possession of a sufficient number of pairs of handcuffs for the 2000 men it had been instructed to shackle, and it therefore had to resort to tying the hands of many prisoners with twine until additional supplies were received.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, it was Canadian, as opposed to British, camp staff who had to deal with the adverse effect that shackling had on the morale of the German prisoners, as well as any acts of resistance that followed as a consequence of this bad feeling. While most cases of resistance were mild, taking the form of written complaints to the ICRC or failure to turn up for morning roll call, there were occasions when matters got out of hand.<sup>52</sup> For example, at Bowmanville camp in Ontario prisoners protested by barricading themselves in, using barrack furniture and anything else to hand. The authorities had to enlist the help of 350 Canadian troops to break the barricade down and, in the process, seven Canadian soldiers and approximately ten German POWs were injured and around \$12,000 worth of damage was incurred.<sup>53</sup> Given the extent of the problems in Canada it is hardly surprising that while reluctantly agreeing to comply with Britain's demand that it shackle prisoners, the Canadian government also made it clear that it was not happy with the way the

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<sup>51</sup> LAC RG25/2777 621-DK-40, letter from Canadian minister in the United States to the Secretary of States for External Affairs, Ottawa, 12 October 1942, regarding a request for the supply of 3,500 pairs of handcuffs with twelve-inch chains from the United States.

<sup>52</sup> LAC RG25/277 621-DK-40, 'Manacling of Prisoners of War', 12 October 1942. Examples of mild resistance occurred at Bravenhurst, Espanola and Monteith camps.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.



crisis was being handled. Indeed, for W.L. Mackenzie-King there was no doubt that the British had 'bungled the business terribly'.<sup>54</sup>

Ultimately it was Canada's determination to reach a resolution that proved decisive in bringing the crisis to an end. Churchill's refusal to take unilateral action – in other words, to cease shackling German prisoners in an attempt to persuade the Germans to do the same – led Mackenzie-King to decide that independent action should be taken. On 2 December 1942 the British government was informed that Canada intended to unshackle its prisoners. To avoid a rift opening between the two governments, the War Cabinet agreed that it would make serious efforts towards reaching a resolution with the German government. Subsequently, and in an effort not to appear to be backing down, Britain secretly asked the Swiss to propose a date for the simultaneous unshackling of prisoners on both sides of the conflict. As a result of this intervention the crisis itself had been brought to an end by January 1943, although minor incidents involving manacling did continue for several months after.<sup>55</sup>

This episode had achieved little other than to demonstrate the fact that POWs, like almost everything else in a time of total war, were viewed by the British and German governments as yet another resource that could be exploited in the effort to vanquish the enemy: it had been, as Ernst von Weizsäcker, the state secretary in the German Foreign Ministry, wrote, 'a gamble on the weakness of the nerves of the other side'.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, the crisis had done much to highlight the tensions underlying the relationship between the Canadian and British governments. Indeed, although Canada had eventually asserted herself, Churchill's lack of restraint had severely undermined Canada's faith in Britain's ability to reach sound decisions in the future regarding the fair treatment of German POWs.

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<sup>54</sup> W.L. Mackenzie-King cited in S.P. Mackenzie, 'The Shackling Crisis'.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Cited in *ibid.*

Nevertheless, between 1940 and 1944 Britain continued to deport German prisoners of war to Canada as the opportunity arose and any discussion of their recruitment into the British economy remained largely academic. In the meantime, in the spring of 1941 certain developments taking place during the course of the war, on the battlefield and on the Home Front, forced the British government to reconsider the possibility of bringing other POWs to Britain. The first of these concerned the strategic nightmare of coping with the thousands of Italian prisoners captured in North Africa during the campaigns of late 1940 and early 1941. The victories had come as a surprise to the British and Commonwealth forces, who, as a result, were not prepared to cope with the 133,000 prisoners in their hands by February 1941.<sup>57</sup> Shortages of camp guards and material provisions, as well as the stipulation contained in Article 7 of the Geneva Convention that ‘as soon as possible after their capture, prisoners of war shall be evacuated to depots sufficiently removed from the fighting zone for them to be out of danger’, meant that it was essential to remove them as soon as might be feasible. In May the War Office was informed by its Directorate of Prisoners of War that, apart from the general prosecution of the war, this issue was ‘the most urgent matter requiring attention’.<sup>58</sup> The British government therefore embarked on a plan to bring Italian prisoners to Britain and, on 26 July 1941, while the War Cabinet was agreeing to deport a further 2,000 Germans to Canada, the first Italian consignment arrived.<sup>59</sup> The contradictory nature of these policies, particularly in terms of the question of legality, seems to have been largely overlooked. On the one hand, the government had defended its policy of deporting Germans to Canada by claiming that

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<sup>57</sup> Kent Fedorowich, ‘Propaganda and Political Warfare: The Foreign Office, Italian POWs and the Free Italy Movement, 1940-3’ in Bob Moore and Kent Fedorowich (eds.), *Prisoners of War and their Captors in World War Two*, 119. This figure continued to rise rapidly and by March 1941 there were already 160,000 Italian POWs in British hands.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> TNA: PRO CAB67/7 WP(41)(G)75, memorandum by the Secretary of State for War, ‘Transfer of German POWs to Canada’, 8 August 1941.

they were being moved 'outside the area of hostilities' and would be 'safe from air-raids', in line with Article 7 of the Geneva Convention, while on the other it chose to overlook the matter in relation to Italian POWs.<sup>60</sup> While there was no doubt concern to relieve the strategic crisis in Africa, a major consideration now was the use to which the Italian prisoners could be put in Britain, particularly since shortages in manpower had begun to affect the performance of the British war economy.

Shortages in the domestic labour market had been apparent since the end of 1940. Events in Europe had overtaken the timetable to which armaments production was geared, and, following Ernest Bevin's appointment as Minister of Labour in the summer of that year, plans were implemented for the rapid reorganisation of the whole economy in which the utilisation and allocation of manpower became the central issue. At the end of 1940 the Beveridge Report on Employment provided the government with the first serious attempt at a manpower budget. It estimated that if the conscription targets were to be reached in the forthcoming year then an additional 1,700,000 men and 84,000 women would be required by the end of 1941.<sup>61</sup> The implication of this was that those conscripted could only be equipped if, by this time, the munitions industries themselves expanded their labour force by an additional one million. Moreover, once the military call-up had taken place, replacements would be needed. By the summer of 1941, the shortages in manpower predicted by the Beveridge Committee were beginning to multiply. A new survey completed in

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<sup>60</sup> TNA: PRO FO67/464, the reason given by Lord Halifax for deporting German POWs to Canada, 4 July 1940: TNA: PRO FO916/2580, memorandum by D.J.M.D. Scott, 15 June 1940: Article 7 of the Geneva Convention specified that 'Prisoners of War shall be evacuated to depots sufficiently removed from the fighting zone for them to be out of danger'.

<sup>61</sup> Alan Bullock, *The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin*, vol. II, 47.

October put the demand for manpower up to June 1942 at a total of two million additional men and women for the armed services and war industries.<sup>62</sup>

Radical solutions to this startling problem included the controversial process of 'dilution', a system whereby, for example, two skilled workers could do the work of three, allowing more use of unskilled workers in industry, and the mass conscription of women. However, the problem in the agricultural sector was even more difficult to address. The decision to call up an additional 10,000 agricultural workers under the age of twenty-five by December 1941 would create another gap in the workforce, which the current climate made difficult to fill. Bevin, at least at this stage in the war, resisted directing British workers into jobs, still believing that it was vital to maintain the willing co-operation of the working class in the war effort. Moreover, the relatively high level of industrial earnings, which had increased from 69s a week on average in October 1938 to 99s 5d by July 1941, deterred any natural flow of labour into agriculture, which at that time was still offering the worker a weekly wage of only 48s. The crisis was aggravated further by the introduction by the government in the first few months of 1941 of increased targets for agricultural production in general and food supplies in particular, with the intention of making up the shortfall in the level of British imports that had arisen since the beginning of the war.

The revised harvesting programme for 1941 called for the further ploughing up of over 2 million acres of grassland in the United Kingdom for the cultivation of potatoes, sugar beet and flax, a figure which would steadily increase into 1942.<sup>63</sup> To ensure that these targets were met, the regional War Agricultural Committees were empowered in the event of disregard of instructions or on grounds of 'inefficient farming' to remove the farmer from his farm and either replace him or farm it

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<sup>62</sup> H.M.D. Parker, *Manpower: A Study of Wartime Policy and Administration* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office & Longmans, Green & Co., 1957), 110.

<sup>63</sup> Keith Murray, *History of the Second World War: Agriculture*, 145.

themselves.<sup>64</sup> The situation, therefore, placed an enormous burden not only on the government to find a solution, but also on the farming community as a whole. Appeals were made to the British public to help ameliorate the agricultural manpower crisis: schoolchildren, university students and workers from the cities volunteered in their thousands for the 1941 harvest. In addition, and not surprisingly given the circumstances, the War Cabinet approved a request in July 1941 from the Ministry of Agriculture for 2-3,000 Italian prisoners of war to work on essential drainage, ditching and land reclamation.<sup>65</sup> By August 1941 2,400 POWs were working in the British countryside as well as 12,000 child volunteers and 19,000 WLA workers. By the following year's harvest the numbers had increased to 20,000, 31,000 and 52,000 respectively.<sup>66</sup> Demand was unceasing and soon requests were received from other ministries, notably the Ministry of Supply (forestry) and the Ministry of Works and Buildings, for a share of the POW labour supply.

However, no serious consideration was given to the possibility of reversing the policy of deporting German prisoners of war or, indeed, transferring those already held in Canada to Britain. Attempts had been made early on by officials to draw the government's attention to this contradiction.<sup>67</sup> The rationale given was that in contrast to the Germans, who were considered to be ideologically committed, 'hostile' opponents of democracy, Italians were 'docile', 'good natured and capable of redemption'.<sup>68</sup> While there was recognition that 'fascist types' existed among them, who the HDSE stressed should be identified and retained in Africa or the Middle East,

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 300.

<sup>65</sup> Bob Moore, 'Turning Liabilities into Assets: British Government Policy Towards German and Italian Prisoners of War During the Second World War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 1997, 117-136. This was clearly a tentative request since when the Regional War Agricultural Executive Committees were asked by MAF to submit their requests for POW labour the demand received was for approximately 15,000.

<sup>66</sup> Keith Murray, *History of the Second World War: Agriculture*, 159.

<sup>67</sup> TNA: PRO FO916/170, Sir G. Warner to the War Office, 12 February, 1941.

<sup>68</sup> TNA: PROPREM3/363/1, Churchill to Sir Edward Bridges, 29 May 1941.

there seems to have been a belief, at least in the Foreign Office, that the Italian commitment to the war differed significantly from that of the German people.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, it was felt that there was little popular support in Italy for either the war or the fascist government; that Mussolini himself had not, unlike Hitler, demonstrated a desire for a 'New Order' in Europe based on his particular brand of fascism; and that far from encouraging Germany in 1939, Mussolini had shown a desire to settle the dispute between Hitler and the future Allies over Danzig by proposing a plan which might have avoided war, and had made it clear that, if war was unavoidable, he did not feel obliged to bring Italy in on Germany's side.<sup>70</sup> Without doubt, Mussolini 'hedged his bets' right up until strategic and political factors led Italy into the Axis camp. However, Italy's non-belligerent phase had at least demonstrated to the Allies that the 'war-like spirit' of her people, so frequently praised by Mussolini, had been much overrated.<sup>71</sup>

Of course, from the end of 1942 there were rumours of Italian attempts to reach an agreement with the Allies on the terms that would be imposed on Italy following her surrender.<sup>72</sup> Much of what was said by the British government regarding the nature of the Italian soldiers must therefore be seen in light of the hope that officials had of bringing about a collapse of Mussolini's regime. Indeed, heightening the morale of the Italian forces was regarded as essential in bringing this about successfully, as Major-General R.A.D. Brooks commented in April 1943:

Since the morale of the Italian fighting services will be our primary target during this phase, every effort should be made to make the Italian soldier feel that our attitude to him is different from our attitude to the Germans.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Sir Llewellyn Woodward, *British Foreign Policy During the Second World War*, 11.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, 11.

<sup>71</sup> Richard Overy, *Interrogations: Inside the Minds of the Nazi Elite* (London: Penguin, 2002), 326.

<sup>72</sup> Kent Fedorowich and Bob Moore, 'Co-Belligerency and Prisoners of War: Britain and Italy, 1943-1945', in *The International History Review*, vol. 18, no. 1, February 1996, 28-47.

<sup>73</sup> Cited in *ibid.*

And so, while the British government's propaganda efforts continued to colour public perceptions of the German POWs to the point where they were considered to be a 'risk not worth taking', there appears to have been a corresponding determination to promote Italian prisoners as a far less disturbing presence.<sup>74</sup> Fortunately for the government, the conduct of the Italian prisoners in Britain ultimately conformed to the view put forward by officials. They proved themselves willing and capable workers and were generally liked by the public with whom they came into contact.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, in the year following their arrival in Britain there had only been two reported cases of Italian POWs misbehaving: one complaint centred on the mistreatment of a swan and the other concerned a prisoner employed in forestry who had 'wandered away a mile or two from his guard and indecently exposed himself to a lady'.<sup>76</sup> Consequently, within months the HDSE relaxed conditions surrounding their employment, allowing small parties to work without escorts and the billeting of others on individual farms to overcome shortages in camp accommodation.

The success of this arrangement meant that when Italy surrendered, subsequently signing an Armistice on 3 September 1943 and joining the war on the Allies' side, concern was raised over its continuation. At that time the government faced a situation in which the manpower resources of Great Britain were exhausted. In many sectors of the economy radical solutions had been called for. In the autumn of 1943, for example, the Ministry of Labour had even conscripted young boys, the 'Bevin Boys' as they became known, to work in Britain's ailing coal industry.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, by this stage in the war twenty-two million men and women out of a population of thirty three million between the ages of fourteen and sixty-four were serving in the armed

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<sup>74</sup> TNA: PRO FO916/170, Memorandum from Sir G. Warner of the War Office, 12 February 1941.

<sup>75</sup> Bob Moore, 'Turning Liabilities into Assets'.

<sup>76</sup> Letter from the Home Office to the Ministry of Agriculture, 11 March 1942, cited in Bob Moore, 'Turning Liabilities into Assets'.

<sup>77</sup> Alan Bullock, *The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin*, 260.

services and industry and, with an estimated requirement of a further 190,000 for 1944, there was a worrying gap between supply and demand.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, with imported foodstuffs almost half of the 1939-40 figure, an additional 69,400 agricultural workers were required for the period 1943-4 in order to plough up a further 700,000 acres and to drain and reclaim wasteland.<sup>79</sup> With many of the WLA being redeployed into the munitions and aviation industries, the only hope of meeting the targets set by the government was the continued and extended use of Italian prisoners of war. Indeed, Churchill was himself adamant in 1943 that Britain should receive '100,000 more Italians into England for work purposes during 1944'.<sup>80</sup>

However, since Italy had effectively changed sides and had been given the status of 'co-belligerent' rather than ally in the war against Germany, British officials were unsure on what terms her Italian prisoners should be held: the Geneva Convention contained no provision for such an eventuality. Clearly, the main concern was to safeguard Britain's labour supply for as long as possible. Indeed, the Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, was adamant that 'whatever their status is to be, Italian Prisoners of War as a whole must be regarded as a pool which Allied Governments will continue to draw on in whatever way will best contribute to the solution of the manpower problem'.<sup>81</sup> The government consequently had to find a way of reconciling the prisoners' legal status with Britain's need for their labour. Retaining them as prisoners of war was ruled out firstly on the basis that Italy's new government under Marshal Pietro Badoglio would, in all probability, refuse to accept it. Indeed, how could the new Italian leader explain away the antithesis between the retention of POW status and the fact that Italians were dying on the battlefield along-side the Allies? In

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 291.

<sup>79</sup> Keith Murray, *History of the Second World War: Agriculture*, 152, 209. The quantity of foodstuffs imported from abroad had fallen from 20,689 million tons in the period 1939-40 to 11,514 in 1943-44.

<sup>80</sup> TNA: PRO PREM3/364/2, Churchill to Lord President of the Council, 16 September 1943.

<sup>81</sup> Kent Fedorowich and Bob Moore, 'Co-Belligerency and Prisoners of War'.



addition, if they were maintained as prisoners of war, the Geneva Convention's rules would continue to place limitations on the types of work on which they were able to be employed by the Allies. On the other hand, the prospect of giving them civilian status also raised concerns, since doing so not only meant that the Allies would lose control over their former prisoners but also that they might face an obligation to ship the men home – a commitment which could not have been undertaken without prejudicing the Allied war effort.<sup>82</sup>

In October 1943 a War Cabinet committee proposed negotiating with Badoglio for a resolution to this problem, whereby the 450,000 captured Italian soldiers held by Britain and the United States over a wide area would remain POWs and would continue to work for the Allies, but under less restrictive conditions. In January 1944 a draft agreement to this effect was submitted to the Italian government. Not surprisingly, Badoglio, out of a sense of national honour, refused to sign. Indeed, it seems that no matter how great his desire to win the approval of the Allies, he knew that agreeing to these terms would make his position untenable in the eyes of the Italian public. At the beginning of April, after making alternative proposals, which the Allies rejected, Badoglio broke off formal negotiations.

The absence of an agreement did not, however, deter the Allies. Indeed, informal talks between the chief of the Allied Control Commission, Lieutenant-General Sir Noel Mason-MacFarlane, and the Italian leader led Mason-Macfarlane to conclude that Badoglio would not object if the Allies silently changed the terms on which they held their prisoners. A telegram from Eden to Britain's ambassador to the United States, Lord Halifax, on 6 April 1944 is revealing of the intrigue surrounding these discussions:

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<sup>82</sup> C.R.S. Harris, *Allied Military Administration of Italy 1943-1945* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1957), 151.

Negotiations having broken down, we are urgently considering our future course of action. British Resident Minister, Algiers, has reported that in his view Badoglio would probably acquiesce in application by us of oral agreement to new areas, provided that the matter is not brought to his notice. Chief Commissioner of Allied Control Commission has also stated that he does not anticipate any serious resistance by the Italian Government if the scheme is implemented. But it seems clear to us that if any publicity were given to such measures, he would be bound to protest. We urge therefore that no publicity whatever shall be given this question.<sup>83</sup>

Churchill regarded this as a 'gentlemen's agreement' and saw no need 'to maul or weaken' Badoglio by demanding his signature.<sup>84</sup> Consequently, it was decided that all captured Italian soldiers under British and US control would be classified legally as prisoners of war but would be given the opportunity to volunteer as 'co-operators' who would, in comparison to 'non-co-operators', be allowed greater freedom as well as better pay and conditions. The added advantages for both Allies was firstly that they were able to retain control over the Italian prisoners and secondly that, although the legal status of these prisoners had not changed, the new title bestowed on them would allow the Allied governments to throw away the shackles of Geneva and at least appear to be employing 'co-operators' legally on work directly associated with the war. Thus, through her contribution to this informal 'understanding' between the Allies and the Italian leader, Britain had shown a willingness to make moral compromises by stretching the boundaries of international law in order to accommodate the economic needs of the country. In so doing a precedent had been set for the manner in which Britain, along with the United States, would come to deal with German POWs after the surrender in 1945.

The arrangements allowed the British government to continue bringing more Italian prisoners to the country to add to the labour force. Of the 140,000 working in

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<sup>83</sup> LAC RG25/2782 621-HV-40 part 2, copy of telegram from Eden to Halifax, 6 April 1944, sent by the Canadian Ambassador to the United States to the Secretary of State for External Affairs, Ottawa, 11 April 1944.

<sup>84</sup> Churchill, cited in Kent Fedorowich and Bob Moore, 'Co-Belligerency and Prisoners of War'.

the UK by October 1944, 100,000 had volunteered to become 'co-operators', most of whom were engaged in agriculture, forestry and on public works schemes. However, when, after the Normandy Invasion of June 1944, the government was also forced to ship German POWs taken in France across the Channel to relieve the poor and embarrassing conditions of the camps there, enormous pressure was placed on the limited camp accommodation in the UK. In order to alleviate this problem, efforts were made by the government to persuade 'non-co-operating' Italian prisoners to become 'co-operators' in order to free up space. In addition, as more and more German POWs were falling into British hands with the advance of Allied troops into Europe, any plans that the government had to transport more Italian prisoners to Britain had to be sacrificed in order to make way for the Germans. By the beginning of 1945, when the repatriation of Italians was underway, and following what must have appeared to be a U-turn in official thinking, it was recognised that if the current manpower demands were to be met then German prisoners would have to replace the Italians as a source of labour.

The decision to employ German POWs created many problems for the British government, however, which were not fully realised until war had ended in Europe. As well as the logistical difficulties involved, there were important legal questions that needed to be addressed concerning, in particular, Britain's right to hold them after the surrender when the Geneva Convention stipulated that prisoners of war should be repatriated as soon as possible after the conclusion of peace. Yet, as the following discussion attempts to show, decisions taken during the war by the three major Allied governments, the United States, the Soviet Union and Britain, on the future state of Germany meant that Britain's POW labour policy was able to proceed relatively unchallenged into the early post-war period, despite its moral and ethical implications.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Changing the Status of German Soldiers Captured at the Surrender: German POWs, Surrendered Enemy Personnel (SEPs) and Disarmed Enemy Forces (DEFs)

According to a draft paper presented by the Ministry of Labour to the War Cabinet in March 1945, the total number of German prisoners of war needed for labour purposes was estimated to be 520,000.<sup>1</sup> It was felt that, until demobilisation was complete, the civilian labour force in Great Britain would be insufficient to meet the essential demands of reconstruction and that German prisoners could help alleviate this problem by being deployed on essential works including housing, food production and re-forestation, as well as large development schemes. However, at that moment Britain was holding only 154,000 German POWs, including 14,000 Austrian nationals, who, as a result of the allies' decision to regard Austria as having been occupied during the war and therefore as a 'victim' of Hitler's expansionist aims in Europe, were to be repatriated as soon as hostilities ended.<sup>2</sup> Also included in that figure were 70,000 men who for one reason or another were deemed unemployable by the British authorities. They comprised the sick and injured, 'technical' personnel, such as German parachute troops, U-Boat crews and men belonging to the German *Luftwaffe*, whom British officials regarded as being fully imbued with the National

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<sup>1</sup> TNA: PRO WO32/11689, 'Demands for Prisoner of War Labour after the Surrender of Germany', March 1945. The following allocations were proposed: Ministry of War Transport – 18,000; Air Ministry – 10,000; Department of Agriculture for Scotland – 14,000; Ministry of Food – 4,000; Ministry of Supply – 11,250; Ministry of Fuel and Power – 1,000; Ministry of Agriculture – 100,000; Ministry of Works – 300,000; War Department – 53,000.

<sup>2</sup> Jill Lewis, 'Worker protest and the origins of the Austrian Social Partnership, 1945-51', in Eleonore Breuning, Jill Lewis and Gareth Pritchard (eds.), *Power and the People: A Social History of Central European Politics, 1945-56* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 42. The status of 'victim' was conferred on Austria by the Allies in the Moscow Declaration of 1943.

Socialist ethos, the officers and other prisoners categorised as ‘ardent’, in other words thoroughly committed, Nazis during the initial screening process. Therefore, only 70,000 POWs were actually considered suitable for labour purposes. Assuming that the repatriation of the 150,000 Italians still in the United Kingdom (115,000 of whom were by now classed as ‘co-operators’) would take place six months after VE Day, over two years after the Italian surrender, the Ministry of Labour was left with a shortfall of 450,000 in meeting the required estimate, a figure that would rise to a staggering 610,000 by 31 March 1945.<sup>3</sup> The critical question was from where and how quickly Britain would acquire this new workforce.

By 1945, manpower budgets had become a vital component in the organisation of Britain’s economy and the focus of much attention, particularly from the ministers heading the ‘Cinderella departments’, the Ministries of Agriculture and of Works, which suffered from acute shortages of labour. However, ensuring the allocation of prisoner of war labour during the months and weeks leading up to the final surrender of Germany was a task filled with uncertainties. While, for example, the War Office expected that 25,000 Germans would eventually be brought to Britain after the German surrender of the Channel Islands, it was also felt that transporting those prisoners who were currently held in the USA and Canada on behalf of the British to the United Kingdom for labour purposes was not a practical option.<sup>4</sup> Those held in Canada, it was argued, were mostly ‘technical’ personnel and therefore not suitable candidates for manual labour. In addition, the 130,000 German POWs captured by the British and currently held in the USA were receiving food and pay on scales

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<sup>3</sup> TNA: PRO WO32/11689 0103/5951. By 31 March 1945 the following additional demands had been presented to the War Office: Ministry of Agriculture – 150,000; Ministry of War Transport – 2,000; Air Ministry – 1,000; Ministry of Food – 1,000; Ministry of Supply – 8,750. This raised the total demand from 520,000 to 680,000.

<sup>4</sup> The German forces occupying the Channel Islands surrendered on 9 May 1945: PRO WO32/1169, ‘Demands for Prisoner of War Labour after the Surrender of Germany’, point 4b.

considerably in excess of those accorded prisoners in Britain. If they were returned they would receive British POW rations, which, it was believed, 'would result in discontent and unwillingness to work'.<sup>5</sup> The only other alternative, therefore, was to transfer to Britain some of the thousands of German prisoners beginning to fill the camps in Western Europe at the end of the war. However, as a result of a joint decision by the United States and Britain to accord those prisoners taken immediately before and after the surrender of Germany, who by June 1945 totalled approximately 3.4 million men, a status other than that of prisoner of war, a degree of urgency was expressed by the War Office regarding this particular course of action. This was because on 14 December 1944, the British government had made a commitment to employ only those with prisoners of war status in Britain after the cessation of hostilities.<sup>6</sup> The introduction of this new category of prisoners, referred to as 'Disarmed Enemy Forces' (DEFs) or 'Surrendered Enemy Personnel' (SEPs) by the US and British Military High Commands respectively, therefore threatened to jeopardise the transfer of the much needed prisoner labour force to Britain.<sup>7</sup> Why, then, was such a drastic step taken by the Allies and, importantly, on whose authority were they able to implement such measures, which effectively denied the new categories of prisoner those rights afforded prisoners of war under the terms of the Geneva Convention?

The authority for this decision had been firmly established by the time war ended in Europe in May 1945. A 'New World Order' now existed in which the main Allied

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> TNA: PRO WO32/1169, Draft Paper for the War Cabinet on 'The Employment of German Prisoners of War in the United Kingdom after the Cessation of Hostilities in Europe'. Reference to meeting held on 14 December 1944, in which it was stated that 'Ministers have decided that Germans employed outside Germany after the cessation of hostilities shall be prisoners of war. This decision applies to the use of this labour in the United Kingdom as well as in the Far East in connection with the war against Japan'.

<sup>7</sup> Rüdiger Overmans, 'German Historiography, The War Losses and the Prisoners of War', in Günter Bischof and Stephen E. Ambrose (eds.), *Eisenhower and the German POWs: Facts Against Falsehood* (Baton Rouge & London: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 147.

powers, the USA, Britain and the Soviet Union, or the 'Big Three' as they became known, assumed a dominant role in post-war planning and decision making, particularly on issues relating to world security and how a defeated Germany should be treated by the victor nations after the war. The first general aims of this 'New World Order' had been laid down by Roosevelt and Churchill in August 1941 and embodied in the Atlantic Charter, which, although not a legal document, set forth a system for disarmament and general security in the post-war period. Its principles were later incorporated into the United Nations Declaration, which the United States, Britain, the Soviet Union, China, France and twenty-one other nations signed in Washington on January 1, 1942.

The UN Declaration was, however, the outcome of an essentially American vision of international organisation based on the results of studies undertaken by the US State Department since the beginning of the war.<sup>8</sup> During the course of 1943 Roosevelt expressed the view that the collaboration of the Great Powers, who had worked well together in prosecuting the war, should continue into the post-war environment in order to ensure the 'efficient future management of the world'.<sup>9</sup> The Four Nations Declaration of October 1943, which included Russia, the USA, Britain and China as its signatories, was intended to strengthen this commitment and, while lip-service was paid to the 'principle of sovereign equality of all peace-loving states' that became members of the United Nations, by the time the UN Charter was finally approved by Roosevelt in February 1944, strenuous efforts had been made by the US

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<sup>8</sup> Forrest C. Pogue, 'The Struggle for a New Order', in John L. Snell (ed.), *The Meaning of Yalta: Big Three Diplomacy and the Balance of Power* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956), 15. A committee of forty-five members was established, including members from Congress, the press, labour and business organisations and members of the major parties, to study the draft proposals and suggest changes.

<sup>9</sup> Roosevelt cited in Forest C. Pogue, 'The Struggle for a New Order', 15. At various conferences Roosevelt tended to be impatient with the claims of the lesser powers. In discussing the Poles he insisted that he would not have them 'making trouble' but would have just settlements worked out for them by the Great Powers.

State Department to protect the interests of the Great Powers.<sup>10</sup> By late April the State Department decided that the UN Executive Council should contain only the four major Allied powers as permanent members (by 1945 France had also been included), recommending that their concurring vote would be required on all decisions affecting the final terms of settlement of disputes, the maintenance of peace, enforcement measures and the regulation of armaments and armed forces.<sup>11</sup> This was the principle of the veto, discussed at length by the 'Big Three' at Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, between 21 and 28 September 1944, and again at Yalta in February 1945.

The implication of the proposed new power structure was that the decisions taken by the 'Big Three' would be largely uncontested and that smaller states would be given little opportunity to shape their own future in the post-war world or, for that matter, to control the actions of others. At a tripartite meeting at Yalta on 4 February, 1945, Churchill and Stalin agreed with Roosevelt that, since the Great Powers had done more than any others to secure peace, the terms of the peace 'should be written by the Three Powers'.<sup>12</sup> What became clearly apparent during the Yalta discussions was that this assumption of pre-eminent status raised fewer concerns for Stalin than it did for the Western leaders, who, unlike the Soviet leader, needed to appeal to the ideas of popular democracy and fairness prevalent among their own peoples. At the same meeting the British Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, expressed awareness of this need when he urged Churchill to insist on a more democratic method of reaching UN decisions than the existing proposal for vetoes, which, he felt, 'would find no support among the English public', presumably on the basis that it would not approve

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>12</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS): Diplomatic Papers. The Conferences at Malta and Yalta, 1945* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1976), 589-591; Bohlen Minutes of the Tripartite Dinner Meeting, February 4, 1945, concerning 'Voice of Smaller Powers in Post War Organisation'.



of replacing one form of totalitarianism with another, albeit Western, model.<sup>13</sup> Churchill understood the dilemma and, consequently, although he talked of there being 'no question of the small powers dictating to the big powers' he was careful to qualify this by adding that 'the great nations of the world should discharge their moral responsibility and leadership and should exercise their power with moderation and great respect for the rights of the smaller nations.'<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, the issue of morality, in terms of moral responsibility as well as moral superiority, became a key psychological factor in securing the dominance of the 'Big Three' in post-war decision-making. Since 1940 the Allies had portrayed the war as a moral crusade in which 'democratic' principles would eventually triumph over the evils of fascism and particularly Nazism. In Britain, as mentioned earlier, huge efforts had been made to encourage strong anti-German public sentiment, which, it was felt, was essential to the war effort but considerably lacking before the end of 1940. This was because in Britain during the inter-war period, opinion had been predominantly isolationist and uninterested in the external world. The existence of Weimar democracy in Germany in the 1920s and Britain's appeasement policy during the late 1930s had reassured a British public intent on avoiding a repetition of the 1914-1918 debacle. When war did break out in 1939 it was portrayed as 'Hitler's war', with Neville Chamberlain, in his indictment of the German Chancellor on 1 September 1939, insisting that the German people were not responsible.<sup>15</sup> This spirit of appeasement was accompanied by a general ambivalence in public attitudes towards the war, which continued for as long as the German forces were operating elsewhere in Europe.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Hansard HOC, 1 September 1939. Neville Chamberlain's address to the House in which he stated that Britain had 'no quarrel with the German people'.

While the Ministry of Information's anti-German propaganda campaign, which began in earnest in June 1940, no doubt had some effect on public perceptions of the enemy, it was not until the end of that year, when Hitler's *Luftwaffe* carried out its bombing offensive on major British ports and cities, that feeling of contempt towards Germany and the German people became prevalent among the population. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the words of Sir Robert Vansittart coming in the form of a series of seven talks on the BBC's overseas service in November and December 1940, at the height of the Blitz, under the title *Black Record: Germany Past and Present*, fell on fertile ground. Echoing the content of his earlier paper, *The Origins of Germany's Fifth War*, Vansittart insisted in a highly simplified and thus popular form that Hitler was no accident but rather 'the natural and continuous produce of a breed which from the dawn of history has been predatory and bellicose'.<sup>16</sup> What drove the Germans to such behaviour he saw as 'Envy, Self Pity and Cruelty' – characteristics which he believed typified the German psyche.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, according to Vansittart, Germany could only be redeemed

By undergoing the most thorough spiritual cure in history, and part at least of that cure will have to be self-administered. It will have to comprise a complete change of heart, mind and soul; of taste and temperament and habit; a new set of morals and values; a new, a brand new way of looking at life. Such an achievement is not inconceivable; it will at best be extremely difficult.<sup>18</sup>

Consequently, while the theme of *Black Record* was clear, its author had gone further than the British government or the MOI's propaganda campaign by posing publicly the perennial question: how can Germany, with such a turbulent history and tradition, ever be reconciled to a peaceful and settled Europe?

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<sup>16</sup> Robert Vansittart, 'Black Record' cited in N. Rose, *Vansittart: A Study of a Diplomat* (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1978), 245.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

Vansittart had occupied the important positions of Permanent Under Secretary of State at the Foreign Office and, from 1938 until his retirement in June 1941, Chief Diplomatic Adviser to the government. He was a man of considerable influence. Moreover, he had been proven right in his criticism of the government's appeasement policy during the 1930s, a fact which helped to ensure that his polemic did not fall on deaf ears. Indeed, it seems that everyone had an opinion about the content of *Black Record*. In political circles his words were either applauded or condemned; press coverage was also characteristically divided between enthusiastic and openly critical.<sup>19</sup> When the broadcasts were eventually turned into a pamphlet, as many as a million copies were requested both at home and abroad.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, after 1940 public debate was unceasing on the 'Problem of Germany' and, depending on one's views on the subject, one was either termed a 'Vansittartite' or an 'anti-Vansittartite'.

Clearly Vansittart had struck a deep and receptive chord with the British people who regarded him as a champion, *par excellence*, of a tough and uncompromising settlement with a defeated Germany. Consequently, he soon broadened his public campaign and, after his retirement from the government, became involved in a kind of fringe politics. Organisations such 'Never Again' or 'Fight For Freedom' were ready vehicles for Vansittart's oratory, which warned against a lenient peace when the war was over. By 1943 he had set up his own organisation, 'Win the Peace', which was so successful that one meeting alone had attracted 10,000 enthusiastic supporters.<sup>21</sup>

There can be no doubt that in 1943, when inter-Allied post-war planning discussions were under way, Vansittart's rhetoric, assisted by the government's propaganda efforts, played a significant role in creating an atmosphere of moral

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<sup>19</sup> Aaron Goldman, 'Germans and Nazis: The Controversy Over "Vansittartism" in Britain During the Second World War', in *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol.14, no.1, January 1979, 155-191.

<sup>20</sup> N. Rose, *Vansittart: A Study of a Diplomat*, 247

<sup>21</sup> A. Calder, *The People's War: Britain, 1939-1945* (London: Panther, 1971), 489.

contempt towards the German people. Compounding this yet further were the human losses suffered by the Allies. Although the horrors of the German concentration camps were not widely known in Britain in 1943, the level of human suffering experienced by the Soviet Union during two years of invasion and occupation by the German army was enough to persuade the world that the critics had been right all along in their assessment of the Germans as a cruel, war-mongering, hate-filled people. Indeed, a Gallup poll conducted in September of that year concluded that forty-five per cent of those Britons asked described their feelings towards the German people as 'hatred, bitterness and anger' – a significant figure when one considers that a poll conducted by the British Institute of Public Opinion in September 1939 had put those responding in similar terms at six per cent.<sup>22</sup> It is therefore not surprising that the Allied governments were able to adopt the moral high ground as far as Germany was concerned and that the confidence that this engendered encouraged them to adopt, in addition, the political high ground. The world, it seemed, would be placed in the safe hands of the victors and of the new United Nations Organisation at the war's end and the implication of this, of course, was that anyone seeking to challenge their position would be deemed politically suspect, if not morally evil.

With the moral underpinnings of Allied authority in place, the new legal framework for the treatment of Germany and her people, including prisoners of war, could be established. At the Casablanca Conference of January 1943, Roosevelt had declared that the Allies would accept nothing less than unconditional surrender from the Axis nations. At that time it was a vague concept, since the end of the war was still not in sight and the Allies had yet to grasp the complex requirements necessary to bring this about. However, over the following years it was given content by the

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<sup>22</sup> George H. Gallup (ed.), *The Gallup International Public Opinion Polls: Great Britain 1937-1975*, vol. 1, 1937-1964 (New York: Random House, 1976), September 1943.

European Advisory Commission (EAC), which was set up by the Allies at the Moscow Conference of Foreign Ministers in October 1943 specifically to deal with this issue.<sup>23</sup> The final text of the surrender terms for Germany was agreed by the EAC on 25 July, 1944, and had been approved by the governments of the United States, Britain and the Soviet Union by December of that year, ultimately being incorporated into the Declaration Regarding the Defeat of Germany and Assumption of Supreme Authority by Allied Powers, issued on 5 June 1945.<sup>24</sup> Its content, drawn up 'in the interests of the United Nations', reflected the degree to which Allied attitudes towards Germany had hardened since the beginning of 1943. It was also evidence of the Big Three's arrogation to themselves of total control since they considered that once the war was over they could strip the Germans of all self-government and be free effectively to punish them as they saw fit. They would, as Winston Churchill declared in 1944, be bound by their 'consciences to civilisation' rather than by the dictates of international law.<sup>25</sup>

It was Article 2(b) of the Instrument of Surrender that referred specifically to Allied treatment of German prisoners and which would provide the legal basis, or at least what was now accepted by the Allies as the legal basis, for the decision to treat post-VE Day prisoners as something other than prisoners of war protected by the Geneva Convention. It stated that all German armed forces should,

at the discretion of the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of the Allied State concerned, be declared to be prisoners of war, pending further decisions, and shall be

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<sup>23</sup> *FRUS: Diplomatic Papers. The Conferences at Malta and Yalta*, 110. The European Advisory Commission was established in London pursuant to agreement reached at the Moscow Conference. Its purpose was to study certain European questions, particularly the matter of surrender terms for Germany, and to submit joint recommendations thereon to the respective governments. The Commission was terminated by an agreement reached at the Potsdam Conference in August 1945.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>25</sup> Winston Churchill, cited in Brian Loring Villa, 'The Diplomatic and Political Context of the POW Camps Tragedy', in Günter Bischof and Stephen E Ambrose, *Eisenhower and the German POWs: Fact Against Falsehood*, 58.

subject to such conditions and directions as may be prescribed by the Allied Representatives.<sup>26</sup>

The EAC clarified this point further by recommending in its report on the surrender terms that:

Under Article 2(b) of the draft Instrument of Surrender of Germany, *there is no obligation on any of the three Allied Powers to declare all or any part of the personnel of the German armed forces prisoners of war: it is their right.* Such a decision may or may not be taken, depending on the discretion of the respective Commanders in Chief. Prisoners of war so declared will be treated in accordance with the standards of international law.<sup>27</sup> (My italics.)

Those who were not 'so declared', therefore, would not be granted such privileges.

The wording of this Article was indicative of the EAC's problem of having to draft terms of surrender that were acceptable to the Soviets, who had not signed the Geneva Convention, as well as the British and US authorities. One of the consequences of the Casablanca codification of the concept of unconditional surrender was that it gave each ally the right to veto any aspect of the surrender. Consequently, there could be no insistence that German prisoners be categorised as 'prisoners of war', since it was, after all, unlikely that Stalin would agree to accord them rights under the Convention's terms, which, among other things, insisted on the inspection of camps by the ICRC as well as placing restrictions on the conditions of POW employment. The solution was therefore to adopt vague language that could be interpreted later. However, in so doing, while making the terms of surrender acceptable to all three leaders, the Article effectively opened the way for the Western powers to evade the Geneva Convention when the occasion arose. During the period leading immediately up to and after the final surrender of Germany in May 1945, this prospect was realised when the British and US armies were confronted with a

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<sup>26</sup> FRUS: *Diplomatic Papers. The Conferences at Yalta and Malta*, 114. 'Unconditional Surrender of Germany', Article 2b.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 112, 'Report by the European Advisory Commission to the Governments of the United States of America, the United Kingdom and the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics'.

situation for which they were ill prepared and which resulted in their Chiefs of Staff ordering a change in the designation of German prisoners to SEP and DEF status.

In his 1989 book, *Other Losses*, the Canadian novelist and historian James Bacque levied the charge that the Allies, particularly the United States under General Eisenhower's instructions, invented the DEF and SEP categories in order to circumvent the Geneva Convention, thereby enabling them, legally and deliberately, to withhold from the prisoners adequate food rations and shelter.<sup>28</sup> The result, according to Bacque, was the death from starvation and disease of between 800,000 and one million German prisoners, which, again according to this author, was hidden in army records by way of a category listed as 'other losses'.

His controversial insistence that the United States instigated with its decision a deliberate 'death camp' policy received the critical attention of historians intent on exposing the distortions as well as the flaws and inconsistencies in Bacque's analysis.<sup>29</sup> The main issue in contention, however, was not the claim that German prisoners were exposed to extremely harsh conditions after the war in Europe, or that thousands, although not hundreds of thousands, had died as a result.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the dimensions of these issues had already been established in detail by the Maschke Commission, set up in 1957 by the West German government, which took sixteen years to complete twenty-two volumes on the history of the German POWs.<sup>31</sup> It was rather Bacque's determination to cling to his conspiracy theory without engaging in a

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<sup>28</sup> James Bacque, *Other Losses: An Investigation into the Mass Deaths of German Prisoners at the Hands of the French and Americans After World War II* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1989).

<sup>29</sup> See Günter Bischof and Stephen E. Ambrose (eds.), *Eisenhower and the German POWs: Fact Against Falsehood*.

<sup>30</sup> Albert E. Cowdrey, 'A Question of Numbers', in Bischof and Ambrose (eds.), *Eisenhower and the German POWs*, 78-92. Cowdrey, in a convincing analysis, estimates the total number of German POWs to have died in Allied camps at 56,285, or one per cent of those held.

<sup>31</sup> Erich Maschke (ed.), *Zur Geschichte der deutschen Kriegsgefangenen des Zweiten Weltkrieges*, 22 volumes, (Munich, 1962-1974). See Appendix B in Bischof and Ambrose (eds.), *Eisenhower and the German POWs*, which lists the titles of the twenty-two volumes.

thorough examination of the context surrounding these events that made his explanation unacceptable.

It is, therefore, not surprising that the counter-argument stresses the weight of historical circumstances in the decision-making process. It points to the impossible task of coping with the staggering numbers of German prisoners that surrendered in the final days of the war. In some instances whole battalions laid down their arms at once – the largest mass surrender of the war occurring on April 18, 1945, when, in the Ruhr, 317,000 POWs were taken in one day.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, in early April the number of prisoners increased from 313,000 to 2.6 million, then to more than five million during the following month. By June 1945 it was estimated that there were as many as 7.6 million German prisoners in Allied hands in north-west Europe alone, 4.6 million more than had been anticipated by the Allies before April 1945.<sup>33</sup>

Of course, added to this catastrophe was the unprecedented mass migration of civilians in Central Europe. By 8 May, when war ended in the European theatre, the Allied armies were swamped with seven million displaced persons in Germany and 1.6 million in Austria, among them slave labourers from all over Europe and inmates of the concentration camps.<sup>34</sup> In addition, the German civilian population was swollen by between twelve and 14.5 million ethnic German refugees expelled from Eastern Europe.<sup>35</sup> These masses created vast problems for the Allies.

Of major concern was how to reach and maintain a basic level of food rations for the German population as a whole, which, in the spring of 1945 ‘was existing on

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., Bischof and Ambrose, ‘Introduction’, 9.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>34</sup> Michael R. Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1985), 296-313.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 324-331.



rations that in the long run would not sustain life'.<sup>36</sup> The grave scarcity of food supplies was a consequence of the chaotic conditions in Germany. Her agricultural sector had experienced serious decreases in production and productivity before the war was over and by 1945 crop levels had dropped by thirty per cent of their pre-war figure.<sup>37</sup> By the end of the war the devastating losses to Germany's transportation system, which had come to a virtual standstill by May 1945, made the distribution of the country's existing supplies a virtually impossible task. Moreover, with the material needs of the liberated territories that had suffered under German occupation also to be addressed, a world food shortage and a lack of transportation facilities, there was a limit to the relief that could be supplied by the Allies.

Confronted with a human crisis of enormous proportions, added to which was the impossible task of meeting the demands of the Geneva Convention with regard to the material requirements of prisoners of war, the Allies sought radical solutions. The British government, which had agreed to share the captured Germans with the United States on a fifty-fifty basis, now refused to take its half, arguing, according to one historian, 'that they did not have the places to keep them or men to guard them on the continent and that moving them to England would arouse public resentment and adversely affect public morale'.<sup>38</sup> The United States, too, found itself unable to fulfil its obligations under the Convention, but now had to accept responsibility for the vast majority of prisoners held under the increasingly appalling 'open field' conditions of the sixteen transit camps, known later as the *Rheinwiesenlager*, or 'Rhine meadow

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<sup>36</sup> James F. Tent, 'Food Shortages in Germany and Europe 1945-1948', in Bischof and Ambrose, *Eisenhower and the German POWs*, 95-112. Tent states that while discrepancies in ration distribution between urban and rural areas existed, the great scarcity of food resulted in the average pre-VE day calorific intake dropping from the already insufficient level of 1,050 to 860 after VE day.

<sup>37</sup> Bischof and Ambrose, 'Introduction', 11.

<sup>38</sup> E.F. Ziemke, *The U.S. Army in the Occupation of Germany 1944-1946*, cited in Bischof and Ambrose, 'Introduction', 6. The British and the US had agreed that they would share the captured Germans on a fifty-fifty basis and for the first months after D-Day half the POWs taken in France were sent across the Atlantic and half across the Channel, regardless of who captured.

camps'. As Allied Commander-in-Chief, General Eisenhower sought the approval of the EAC and the Combined (Anglo-American) Chiefs of Staff (CCS) in utilising the 'right' bestowed on him under Article 2(b) of the surrender terms to alter the status of prisoners taken immediately before and after VE Day. Understanding that there was not enough food to feed them according to the Convention, the CCS strongly favoured the creation of a new category of prisoners. Subsequently, the British Supreme Allied Commander in the Mediterranean, Field Marshal Sir Harold Alexander, asked the CCS for permission to apply the same policy to German prisoners taken by the British in Austria and Italy.<sup>39</sup>

The reasoning behind the request is, however, not as obvious as Bacque suggests and even the counter-argument, which adduces historical circumstances and the impossibility of meeting the material requirements of the Geneva Convention as justification for the decision, is not particularly satisfying. Indeed, both fail to address one very important question, which is why, since the Big Three had already established themselves as the supreme authority by 1945, was it necessary to change the status of prisoners at all?

One of the critical questions discussed during the tripartite negotiations over surrender terms was the issue of whether any German government was going to be recognised. For the Allies, that prospect was intolerable, since it was regarded as being incompatible with the concept of total surrender. Stalin, of course, also knew that a politically, as well as economically, weak Germany would be more open to Communism's westward advance. It was therefore decided jointly that when war ended Germany would be left without a central government. Consequently, the protection received by German prisoners throughout the conflict from Switzerland as

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<sup>39</sup> Brian Loring Villa, 'The Diplomatic and Political Context of the POW Camps Tragedy', 62.

the Protecting Power would also be withdrawn, since under these circumstances there would be no legitimate government to which it could report.<sup>40</sup> A War Office paper dated 16 June 1945 announced the British Government's acceptance of the 'abandonment' by the Swiss Government of this function in relation to Germany and Austria and set forth a modified framework for the control and organisation of prisoners of war in British hands, which was to be communicated to all commandants of German POW camps.<sup>41</sup> It stated that while it was 'useful and proper' that the ICRC should continue their humanitarian work for the German prisoners, it was nevertheless desirable not to promote the organisation to the status of a diplomatic intermediary. In future, it was required, for example, that all complaints regarding poor treatment should be made by the prisoners directly to the Detaining Power, and that the latter would also become solely responsible for the maintenance of discipline among the POWs. After all, according to official thinking, 'no useful purpose would be served by an attempt to maintain anything analogous to the Geneva Convention procedure', in terms of the treatment afforded the POWs.<sup>42</sup> That would only allow room for confusion over what the Allies meant regarding the concept of 'total surrender'. Instead, it was regarded as important that the new status quo was understood by all, particularly the Germans, since, as the War Office pointed out, there was no 'wish to encourage any belief which might perhaps later on give grounds for any form of challenge to the legal basis of the Declaration of 5 June'.<sup>43</sup> There were to be no inconsistencies – prisoners of war were now subject to the unconditional will of the Allies.

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<sup>40</sup> TNA: PRO FO916/1219, memorandum by the War Office, 'Protecting Power – Withdrawal of Swiss Government', 16 June 1945. This includes recognition by the Canadian authorities that 'in the present unique situation there can be no protecting power for a Government that does not exist'. Ibid., 66.

<sup>41</sup> TNA: PRO FO916/1219 PWCA/P (45)26, June 16, 1945.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

It is impossible, therefore, to maintain that the introduction of new prisoner categories had been intended to remove any legal restraints on the treatment meted out by the British and Americans, since they were in effect only accountable to themselves. Indeed, the Allies could not, nor, after May 1945, would they have felt compelled legally to, feed POWs according to the Geneva Convention's requirements.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, when Bacque insists that the categories DEF and SEP were deliberately created in order to allow the implementation of a policy of starvation, he overlooks one key point, which is that if this had been the intention of the Anglo-American Chiefs of Staff they would not have had to introduce new categories in order to do so. Ultimately, the decision, taken in response to circumstances in which human suffering and loss of life were inevitable consequences of the prevailing chaos and in which the actual difference in material well-being between POWs, DEFs and SEPs was anyway negligible, did not provide a legal cover for the British and Americans – this had been provided by the terms of unconditional surrender and was, in effect, theirs simply by right of victory. Rather, the creation of new prisoner categories allowed the Western Allies at least to appear to be acting legally in the eyes of the world, something that was particularly important at the precise moment when their international prestige and standing was in the ascendant. Indeed, while the crisis and its outcome were unavoidable, measures could be taken to avoid, as far as possible, being judged as criminals by the international community and particularly Germany who had been released from Nazi rule and would now be looking to the Allies, or at least the Western Allies, to set a good example.

The Soviet Union's treatment of German prisoners, of whom there were approximately three million by the end of the war, was a different matter entirely, and

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<sup>44</sup> Bischof and Ambrose, 'Introduction', 17. The Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) issued a directive, JCS1067, which provided for rations that would prevent 'disease and unrest' in Germany.

is worth mentioning because at the time it would surely have distracted attention from the situation in the camps run by the Western Allies. The first large contingent had been captured at Stalingrad between December 1942 and January 1943, after which the numbers steadily rose, with complete German army divisions being taken at once during the second half of 1944 and up to May 1945. However, since the Soviet Union was not a signatory of the Geneva Convention and was therefore not bound, either legally or morally, to meet any of its requirements with regard to prisoners of war, German soldiers were left uncertain and fearful of what awaited them if they were captured by the Red Army. Consequently, many deliberately surrendered themselves to the British or American forces during the final stages of the war, believing that they would be assured more humane treatment. This attitude was understandable, since not only had the Nazi Propaganda Minister warned the German people that defeat would result in their enslavement in the East, but Stalin had himself told the Tehran and Yalta Conferences that he wanted four million German labourers for an indefinite period.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, Stalin made it clear that he regarded German labour as a justifiable and morally sound form of reparations, and certainly, if a moral balance-sheet were to be drawn it would show the devastating loss of Russian POWs in German hands, where, out of the 5.2 million captured by the summer of 1944, 2.2 million were reported as dead.<sup>46</sup>

What happened to prisoners after capture by the Soviets was largely left to speculation, since the regime was not obliged to, and did not notify the ICRC of the names of captured Germans after the war, and behaved restrictively with regard to allowing its prisoners to send mail home. There was, therefore, fearful uncertainty and

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<sup>45</sup> Brian Loring Villa, 'The Diplomatic and Political Context of the POW Camps Tragedy', 62.

<sup>46</sup> Richard Overy, *The Dictators: Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia* (London: Allen Lane, 2004), 518. According to Overy estimates for the death of Soviet prisoners over the whole war period range from 2.54 million to 3.3 million.

increasing concern among relatives in Germany over where their loved-ones were to be found, a question which received much attention in the German press.<sup>47</sup> In 1945 there was no answer to this question, and it would not be answered fully until over a decade later, when the final repatriations took place. In all, more than two million prisoners were returned to Germany, 1.4 million by 1948, the last in January 1956<sup>48</sup>, leading to a common assumption in the West that around another million had perished in the Soviet prison camps. However, this has since been challenged by numbers cited in official Soviet documents, which reveal that out of the 2.88 million German prisoners of war taken by the Red Army, 356,000 actually died in captivity – still a relatively high mortality rate of 14.9 per cent.<sup>49</sup>

On balance, therefore, a prisoner's chance of survival was far greater if held by the Western Allies than by the Soviet Union. Conditions *were* dreadful in the German camps in the summer of 1945 and many died as a result, but this was largely beyond the control of those in charge even though the camps were thrown open to the albeit 'accompanied' and now unofficial inspection of the ICRC. Moreover, the release of the vast majority of POWs, SEPs and DEFs in 1945 to relieve the critical labour shortage which supervened in Germany following the repatriation of Russian POWs and European slave labourers, no doubt helped allay the public's fears that the Western Allies' intentions towards the new category of prisoners were not entirely honourable.

The British Government believed it necessary to follow the American lead in introducing the new prisoner categories, thereby seeking to preserve its legal as well

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<sup>47</sup> Rüdiger Overmans, 'German Historiography, the War Losses and the Prisoners of War', in Bischof and Ambrose, *Eisenhower and the German POWs*, 154.

<sup>48</sup> Richard Overy, *The Dictators*, 518-520.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, although there can be no certainty, it is possible that the remainder of the missing German soldiers had died during the final stages of the war, either in combat or shortly after capture by the Red Army.

as moral integrity. But, there were also serious concerns in March 1945 over the potential economic impact that this change would have, particularly with regard to the plan to incorporate a further half a million or so German prisoners into the British economy in the post-war period. When questions arose over whether, since those taken immediately before and after the surrender were to be accorded a different status, there would be a sufficient number of POWs held on the Continent to meet the current demand for labour in Britain, concerns over legality and morality were put to one side. Indeed, the policy of introducing new prisoner categories had been approved by the War Cabinet only on the understanding that Eisenhower, as the Supreme Allied Commander, would ensure that adequate numbers of German POWs were excluded from those who would otherwise be treated as disarmed German soldiers. He was expected to exercise his discretion under Article 2(b) of the Instrument of Surrender and ensure that a suitable proportion of captured Germans, who would otherwise be released, were retained as prisoners of war since, ‘once they have been released or hostilities have ceased it will no longer be possible to make German soldiers prisoners of war. It is therefore essential that the number estimated and consequently declared or retained as prisoners of war should not be too low.’<sup>50</sup> As if this was not enough, the number retained had to be ten per cent in excess of the number required ‘to provide for sick and errors in classification’ – no Austrians, SS, or other extreme Nazis or ‘technical personnel’ were to be included. The consequence of Britain’s demand was that while the vast majority of SEPs and DEFs detained by the British and Americans were released in Germany, many in time for that year’s harvest under ‘Operation Barleycorn’, others, who it appears now had the ironic misfortune of having POW rather than SEP status, were being retained and found themselves in a situation where

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<sup>50</sup> TNA: PRO WO32/1168, Draft Paper for the War Cabinet, ‘Employment of German Prisoners of War in the United Kingdom After the Cessation of Hostilities’.

they were having to face an indefinite period of involuntary servitude in Great Britain rather than serve the needs of the reconstruction effort in their own country.

With the demand for POW labour from the various ministries reaching a total of almost 730,000 by May 1945, the whole issue was not only causing growing concern at home but, due to a lack of the accommodation and personnel necessary for the retention of prisoners awaiting transfer to the UK, was also becoming increasingly burdensome for the Occupation authorities.<sup>51</sup> By the end of 1945 the situation was still far from manageable. In December Field Marshal Montgomery expressed his anxiety as follows:

We must discharge the bulk of German disarmed personnel that I now hold in concentration areas because I have nowhere else to put them and also because I will not have the necessary troops to guard them.... My total holding is 700,000 which is far too large. Some 111,000 are sick in hospital and a considerable number are foreigners such as Hungarians and others. I am prevented from getting rid of the bulk of Germans proper by order, which makes me hold 225,000 as reparations labour for the UK. It is urgent that I should be freed from this commitment at once.<sup>52</sup>

The British Government, however, continued to place British interests above those of the Occupation authorities as well as those of the German prisoners. Supported in its actions by the Instrument of Unconditional Surrender, which became the single most important factor in undermining the legal position of German prisoners of war who had traditionally been protected by the terms of the Geneva Convention, the government demonstrated a determination to extract as much labour from Germany as possible as a form of compensation for British losses during the

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<sup>51</sup> TNA: PRO CO537/1320 WP(45)292, War Office Circular on 'The Employment of German Prisoners of War Outside Germany after the Cessation of Hostilities', 10 May, 1945. The following number of prisoners were requested: Ministry of Works - 300, 000; Ministry of Agriculture - 250,000; Ministry of War Transport - 27,000; Ministry of Supply - 20,000; Ministry of Food - 5,000; Ministry of Fuel and Power - 1,4000; Air Ministry - 13,600; Admiralty - 1,000; Army Service Units - 108,000.

<sup>52</sup> By the end of 1945 there were 500,000 German prisoners in British hands out of a total of 3,700,000 in May 1945. See Matthew Barry Sullivan, *Thresholds of Peace: Four Hundred Thousand German Prisoners and the People of Great Britain, 1944-1948* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1979), 21.



war. While she was not alone in doing this, it has been argued that Britain was the country most 'deeply implicated' in the formulation of a labour reparations policy which was ultimately responsible for preventing German prisoners of war from returning to their homes for a prolonged period, and from which Britain profited beyond 1946.<sup>53</sup> By considering the evolution of Britain's war-time plans for Germany and reparations, the following discussion attempts to assess this claim.

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<sup>53</sup> Brian Loring Villa, 'The Diplomatic and Political Context of the POW Camps Tragedy', 52-57.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Labour Reparations

Inter-Allied negotiations on the reparations issue, particularly in the months immediately following the war, were fraught with frustration, indignation and indecision. This was because whatever policies were ultimately formulated had to be agreed by, and therefore reflect the views of, four very different powers, among which Britain, by 1945, was far from being the most influential. Despite the relatively subordinate part that Britain played in the reparations story, however, it has been argued that one policy in particular, that of labour reparations, was of Britain's making and that as a result this country was not merely complicit with but largely responsible for the 'harsh Allied exploitation of POW labour' for years after the war.<sup>1</sup> The following discussion, therefore, explores the political context which formed the extremely complex decision-making environment from which the labour reparations policy emerged after the war, and the degree to which Britain contributed to its formulation, thereby, as one author maintains, giving licence to the enslavement and maltreatment of, as well as profiteering from, German prisoners of war for a prolonged period after 1945.<sup>2</sup>

Until 1945 the issue of what Germany should be made to pay in reparations after the war was avoided as a topic of detailed discussion between the three principal

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Loring Villa, 'The Diplomatic and Political Context of the POW Camps Tragedy' in Günter Bischof and Stephen E. Ambrose (eds.), *Eisenhower and the German POWs: Facts Against Falsehood* (London & Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992) 52-77. Villa makes this charge in his condemnation of James Bacque's controversial book, *Other Losses* (1989). Bacque, Villa asserts, used selectively chosen evidence 'in an effort to create and maintain an illusion of American malevolence and British benevolence'.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Allied leaders. Although Stalin had always been forthcoming about his own objectives concerning Germany, both Roosevelt and Churchill had adopted a 'policy of postponement' on the subject of reparations throughout the conflict, insisting that it was impossible to assess the amount that Germany could afford to pay until they had discovered what was left of the country after the war.<sup>3</sup> The reality of the matter was, however, that both western leaders understood that any attempt on their part to define more exactly the terms of the peace with Germany would either threaten the unity of the Allies or, since Russia would be the stronger contender for reparations, threaten specifically Western interests in the post-war era. Indeed, moderate terms would only serve to convince Stalin and the Soviet people that the West intended to rebuild Germany as a bulwark against the Soviet Union, while a commitment to harsh terms, as demanded by the Soviet Union, would 'give hostages to the future' by threatening the economic regeneration of Western Europe after the war.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, whenever discussions arose over the post-war treatment of Germany they tended to focus on matters of security and the joint occupation of the country, despite Stalin's frustration, and, while all agreed with the principle that if reparations were demanded they should be 'in terms of goods and services, not money', joint discussion on this issue was on the whole confined to vague generalities.<sup>5</sup>

When negotiations as to post-war arrangements began in earnest at the Yalta Conference in February 1945, it was, not surprisingly, the Russians who took the lead and made extravagant claims on Germany, including the demand for a share of a total

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<sup>3</sup> John L. Snell, 'What to do with Germany', in John L. Snell (ed), *The Meaning of Yalta* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956), 40.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 40-41.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

of twenty billion dollars in reparations.<sup>6</sup> This amount, according to Maisky, the Soviet Deputy Foreign Secretary, was to be divided between the Allies according to two priority indices - '(1) the proportional contribution of any one nation to the winning of the war, (2) the material losses suffered by each nation' – both of which were intended to ensure that the Soviet Union received the 'wolf's share'.<sup>7</sup>

It was, of course, impossible to dispute the fact that Russia had suffered most heavily at the hands of the Germans during the war and, as Churchill himself admitted at the Yalta negotiations, based on the proposed criteria, 'the Soviet Union stood well' to receive a disproportionately large share of any deal that was agreed.<sup>8</sup> The Prime Minister, however, objected to the war effort as the only criterion qualifying a nation for reparations preferring, ironically, the socialist principle: 'from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs'.<sup>9</sup> In other words, as far as Churchill was concerned, while demand for reparations might have been high in some cases, careful thought had to be given as to the quantity and type of reparations that Germany could actually afford to deliver. However, Russia, the first country to submit its plan for Allied approval at Yalta, already envisaged two categories involving firstly, 'the removal from the national wealth of Germany of plants, machine tools, rolling stock, etc. to be completed within a period of two years after the end of hostilities', and, secondly, an unspecified demand for 'payments in kind to last for ten years'. With regard to the latter, Roosevelt sought to ascertain exactly what Stalin's intentions were, referring particularly to the issue of using German manpower as a form of

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<sup>6</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers (FRUS), The Conferences at Malta and Yalta 1945* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1976), 702. Ivan M. Maisky presenting Soviet demands for German reparations at the Meeting of Foreign Ministers, February 7, 1945.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 620.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 703.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 633.

reparations in kind.<sup>10</sup> This was because, at the Tehran Conference in November 1943, Stalin had mentioned transferring a staggering four million workers to the Soviet Union after the war to help in the reconstruction of the country.<sup>11</sup> Roosevelt was, therefore, right to seek clarity on a proposal with such sweeping implications. The Soviet leader, however, was now dismissive of the issue, arguing that he was 'not ready to present any plan' with regard to the use of German workers, and maintained this position for the duration of the Yalta Conference.<sup>12</sup>

Stalin's reserve, however, masked his real intention on the labour reparations issue, which, as time would tell, was simply to take whatever he could get. A clearly defined proposal would have required figures, projections, and time-scales and would have had to involve enormous compromises on his part, since the inclusion of labour on a large scale in the reparations agreement would no doubt have led to a corresponding reduction in the amount of capital assets that the Soviets were able to remove from Germany. Furthermore, a briefing paper on American Policy Interests presented prior to the Yalta Conference had declared that certain criteria would have to be negotiated with regard to the treatment of such labour in order to prevent abuses occurring. It acknowledged that, while the US had no compelling reason to oppose Soviet claims for manpower 'within reasonable limits', 'minimum standards of treatment and a relatively short period of service would have to apply.'<sup>13</sup> These, however, were commitments that Stalin was not prepared to make. As a result he resisted bringing the whole issue on to the agenda, no doubt in the hope that it would also be overlooked by the Western leaders at Yalta and consequently omitted from the final reparations agreement. Indeed, when the Secretary of State, Edward Stettinius,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 620.

<sup>11</sup> Alec Cairncross, *The Price of War: British Policy on German Reparations 1941-1949* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), n72.

<sup>12</sup> *FRUS Diplomatic Papers: The Conferences at Malta and Yalta*, 620.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 194-196, Reparations and Restitution Policy Towards Germany, January 12, 1945.

presented the United States' counter-proposal on reparations, which he declared to be 'fundamentally based on the Soviet principles', it appeared that the Soviet leader's strategy had met with success.<sup>14</sup> While the use of German labour as a form of reparations in kind was mentioned by Stettinius, it was only to propose setting it aside as a question 'to be considered at a later date', and no reference was made to the terms and conditions outlined in the pre-conference document.<sup>15</sup>

Britain, however, refused to agree with her Allies on almost every aspect of the reparations question raised at Yalta, and, not surprisingly, when the British proposal was presented on February 10, 1945, it was found to differ significantly from its counterparts, particularly on the issue of what reparations were actually meant to achieve. It gave priority to the security aspect of extracting reparations, specifying, for example, that the removal of German industry was 'to be carried out chiefly for the purpose of destroying the war potential of Germany' rather than for commercial reasons. However, there was another important difference. Although the Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, had agreed with Roosevelt that the details of a labour reparations plan should be considered at a later date, and that for the time being it was 'inadvisable to name any figures for deliveries', out of the three Allies Britain was alone in formally incorporating the use of German labour into its reparations plan, under point 2(c). This item was subsequently incorporated into Article Five of the Yalta Protocol as an issue for discussion at the first meeting of the newly formed Allied Reparations Commission (ARC), which was to be held at Moscow.

Why had Britain pressed for the unprecedented inclusion of labour services in its reparations proposal? It is possible that there was a humanitarian dimension to this decision, a desire to reach an agreement on the rules governing the use of German

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 808.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

labour so as to prevent any excesses that would be likely to occur without them, particularly in the Soviet Union. However, since Stalin had always refused to sign the Geneva Convention, Churchill would surely have considered it unlikely that the Soviet Union would adhere to any international standard regarding the treatment of German workers or prisoners of war. On the other hand, it may have been Britain's own moral standing that Churchill sought to protect. Since the terms of the Geneva Convention required that POWs should be returned 'as soon as possible after the conclusion of peace', which admittedly left much room for interpretation, the formal incorporation of labour services into a reparations agreement would allow Britain, under international agreement, to retain her existing German POWs for labour purposes after the war. Nevertheless, although by 1945 the dire manpower situation in Britain no doubt made this an attractive prospect, this should not divert attention from the fact that the labour reparations issue had been regarded as vitally important and repeatedly raised by British officials since 1942, and that their concerns at that time were far broader in scope than the preservation of Britain's moral integrity or, indeed, the fulfilment of her domestic manpower requirements in the immediate post-war period.

Inter-departmental discussions of the reparations question began towards the end of 1941, when officials from the Foreign Office and the Treasury met to consider how Germany should be treated after the war. According to Alec Cairncross, head of the Economic Advisory Panel preparing the British plan for Germany, the ministers and officials involved were influenced in their thinking by past experience and the general feeling that a renewed effort to extract currency from Germany would again adversely affect the economies of all concerned. Indeed, 'to squeeze Germany 'till the pips squeak', as Lloyd George had so bluntly put it in 1918, would not be a viable option

for the safeguarding of Britain's long-term economic security.<sup>16</sup> While there was no question that Germany should pay reparations, this time around attention had to be paid in advance to four important and closely related issues. The first was what became known as the transfer problem, which involved an assessment of Germany's capacity to pay reparations in terms of her ability to produce enough goods to raise the necessary foreign exchange to meet her obligations, and the complex process of trade with and payments to the receiving countries. The second issue under discussion was the supposed advantage to the Allies of requiring payments in kind rather than money, and the third was the need to take precautions against a situation arising whereby the Allies were having to provide excessive loans to Germany to enable her to meet her obligations, which had occurred after the First World War when, between 1925 and 1931, Germany had borrowed nearly twice as much as she paid in reparations.<sup>17</sup> Finally, all were conscious that public opinion in the aftermath of war might well be fickle and that decisions made in 1942 would in all probability not be suited to the public mood of the post-war era, which would be dictated by the desire to maintain peace rather than exact revenge.<sup>18</sup>

However, while the lessons of the past were influential, other elements played a significant role in the decision-making. These were mainly political and concerned with the developing power relationships between the three Allies. In particular Britain had to consider the wisdom of upsetting Russia on the reparations issue when, as Cairncross acknowledged, it seemed obvious to many even in 1942 that it would be Russia not Germany that would have to be reckoned with in the post-war era. The

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<sup>16</sup> Sir Alec Cairncross, *The Price of War*, 1-16; David Lloyd George, cited in John Mander, *Our German Cousins: Anglo-German Relations in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (London: John Murray, 1974), 238.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.



question that needed to be answered, therefore, was how could Britain safeguard her own economic position while satisfying the USSR's extravagant claims on Germany?

In November 1942 an inter-departmental committee was established under the foreign office legal adviser, Sir William Malkin, specifically to address this question. A lengthy report based on its reasoning, which was declared to be 'partly economic and technical, but largely political and psychological', was eventually produced by the Committee at the end of August 1943, and circulated to all concerned.<sup>19</sup> Out of the seven forms of reparations listed in the Malkin Report, the first three were related to payments in kind to be levied over a limited period, with points four and five specifically referring to the use of German labour, and demanding 'the performance of tasks in Allied territory by organised German labour' and 'the services of labourers not organised for special tasks to be made available outside Germany'.<sup>20</sup>

The inclusion of labour services in the reparations proposal was, as already mentioned, in large part intended to help Britain avoid encountering many of the problems associated with the demands made on Germany following the First World War. It satisfied those ministers, the 'doves' in this case, who would have preferred a settlement in which reparations would either not have figured at all or would have been on a very modest scale – those, such as Professor Jewkes of the Reconstruction Ministry, who believed that there would be no benefit in extracting from Germany material and supplies which would not only serve merely to reinforce Britain's own surpluses but would also have a detrimental impact on Germany's economic recovery and ultimately, as Keynes, a prominent member of the Malkin Committee, had

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<sup>19</sup> TNA: PRO CAB124/353, The Report of the Interdepartmental Committee on Reparations and Economic Security, 31 August 1943.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

stressed, Britain's own economic security.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, however, labour as a means of reparations payment had a potentially high value and would have satisfied the 'hawks', like Hugh Dalton, President of the Board of Trade, who believed that Germany was morally, economically and politically bound to compensate the countries that had suffered most. Indeed, the Malkin Report's recommendations on German labour outlined an alternative means of satisfying the extravagant claims of others, particularly the Soviet Union, but with minimum disturbance to British trade, and it also offered some incidental advantages. For example, since such labour would be directly engaged in physical reconstruction, the proposal met the Committee's view of reparations as compensation for enemy damage to property, from which, of course, Britain herself stood to benefit. As a means of payment it would not be subject to the complex problems associated with the transfer of currency and goods and, therefore, could be relatively swiftly put in place. Moreover, since Britain in particular attached great importance to Germany's ability to pay for her imports and trade after the war, and was determined to avoid having to provide her with the currency to meet these costs, which had been the case after the First World War, labour services promised to be the most affordable and, therefore, least damaging to all concerned. In addition, and importantly, the impressments of German labour would, according to those drafting the Report in 1943, help facilitate the moral regeneration of Germany: they considered it to be a means of directly including her citizens in a co-operative effort on an international scale to help restore the economic life of the war-shattered areas rather than a form of punishment.

Taking into account the likely shifts in public opinion after the war, the Report acknowledged that limitations on the use of such labour would have to be put in place

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., Ministerial Observations on the Malkin Report by the Ministry of Reconstruction, January 1944.

since, it noted, while ‘this expedient may have a proper place in the punitive measures of the early days, when punishment to fit the crime will have its palpable justification even in German eyes, ...it involves political dangers and may on grounds of humanity, fail to command support for any long period’.<sup>22</sup> The ministers concerned consequently recommended that German labour reparations abroad should be completed within three years after the war. In addition, they envisaged labour services as taking the form of work done by organised groups of Germans in the restoration of buildings and means of transport, or of work carried out by individuals on special tasks. The maximum number of Germans engaged in such forced labour would, the Report recommended, be three million in the first year, two million in the second, and one million in the third year after the war. Housing, subsistence and any pocket money paid to them should be charged to the governments employing them, while the German Government would be responsible for the provision of clothing and furnishing their dependants in Germany with any necessary subsistence.<sup>23</sup>

Although the recommendations of the Malkin Report showed foresight and, on the issue of labour reparations, were in keeping with later views expressed in subsequent reports drawn up for the British Government, it was the estimate of labour value, which had been calculated by Keynes to be £40 per labourer per annum, that would later become the primary focus of ministers’ attention. Indeed, during the months that followed the Yalta Conference Britain in particular was anxious, now that labour had been accepted in principle by the Big Three as a suitable means of payment, to ‘wean away’ the Russians from their extravagant demands for ten billion dollars’ worth of German plant and material. The Interdepartmental Committee on Reparations and Economic Security therefore set about formulating the policy that it

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<sup>22</sup> TNA: PRO CAB124/353, *The Malkin Report*, 31 August 1943.

<sup>23</sup> Sir Alec Cairncross, *The Price of War*, 30.

intended to pursue at the Moscow Reparations Commission at the end of June 1945. Its first paper on the issue, circulated to the Cabinet on 7 March, underlined the importance of including labour services in any valuation of reparations deliveries, taking into account Keynes's estimate for labour value in the Malkin Report. On 11 April the Committee discussed the issue at length. It considered what Russia was likely to collect in labour reparations based on Stalin's demand at the Tehran Conference for four million Germans, and, considering Russia's reconstruction needs, predicted that these workers would be required for a ten-year period. This, the Committee considered, would result in labour reparations worth \$6.4 billion in addition to the \$10 billion in German capital goods already claimed by the Soviets, which would mean that the USSR's share of the proposed total of \$20 billion would increase from fifty to eighty-two per cent, a figure which the Committee insisted was 'obviously too high'.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, ministers could not contemplate increasing the existing reparations total proposed by Russia even further in order to accommodate her demand for German labour, since they believed that \$20 billion was already beyond Germany's capacity to pay. Nor was there any hope that the Soviets would accept Britain's preferred option of a 'no fixed sum' reparations deal, which would result in the claimants receiving their percentage share of what Germany could afford to pay. Yet whatever course was taken, ministers knew that labour would be extracted from Germany and that it would be 'blindness' to omit it from the reparations account – Russia must be made to accept labour services as a percentage of any fixed sum that was agreed. It was, therefore, imperative that the Committee considered in advance the potential problems associated with its inclusion, and the questions that were likely to be raised at the forthcoming Moscow ARC.

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<sup>24</sup> TNA: PRO T236/255, Labour as Reparations, 11 April 1945.

As well as tackling the formidable task of trying to persuade Russia to forego a substantial part of the physical deliveries she laid claim to in favour of German labour, a course which would, the government believed, reduce the burden on Germany, agreement would also have to be reached between all the claimant countries on how many Germans they wanted and for how long they required them. For Russia and, of course, Great Britain, these figures had already been estimated based on manpower requirements and reconstruction demands. However, for other countries in Europe during 1945, the situation was far from clear and these were not easy assessments to make. In such instances estimates arrived at prematurely would be bound to cause problems. For example, if countries over-estimated the period over which labour was required and returned their unwanted workers, would they be entitled to claim an equivalent value in goods instead? If, alternatively, they underestimated their requirements, would they have a right to convert their claims for goods into a claim for labour? Both situations, it was felt, would have harmful consequences – the first scenario would interfere with planned production programmes in Germany, whereas the second, if put into effect after all prisoners of war had been released, would require the occupying powers to round up and deport civilian labour.

There was also the contentious, yet crucial, question of labour value to be addressed. It was all well and good naming a figure of £40 per head per annum, but this was a specifically British estimate, which would not necessarily correspond with that of other claimant countries. Indeed, how would it be possible to reach agreement on value, which was essential to the viability of Britain's proposal, when it would surely have been in the interest of countries with the largest labour claims to place the lowest value on labour in order to maximise their claims for goods, and of those with small or no labour claims to set the value as high as possible for the same reason?

Moreover, would workers in the receiving countries regard the acceptance of a lower value as an attempt to reduce national wage levels, and equally importantly, would it not be necessary to determine value by the type of manpower required by the claimant countries as well as the skills of those employed? Indeed, on this last issue the Reparations Committee was anxious that labourers would be organised and distributed between the claimants fairly and it was much concerned to ensure that 'Russia did not skim off the cream of labour in her own zone'.<sup>25</sup>

There were, however, no ready answers to these questions since they could, the Committee felt, only be settled through inter-Allied discussion at Moscow. If consensus was reached, the drawing up of details, such as which Germans should be used as reparations labourers and the conditions under which they should be employed, would necessarily follow, and on these issues there was a little more clarity on what the British delegation considered acceptable terms. It was pointed out that there was nothing to prevent the Allies, under the terms of Unconditional Surrender, from taking reparations labour from any suitable source. The British government, however, had declared its intention since November 1944 only to take labour from among those held as prisoners of war at the time of surrender and, although ministers were now eager to emphasise that Britain reserved the right under Article 2(b) to convert some of those held as Surrendered Enemy Personnel to prisoners of war in order to meet Britain's demand for reparations labour, it intended to maintain this position.

By April 1945, the Soviets, on the other hand, had already taken many German civilians for labour in the Soviet Union – a strategy that the British government did not intend to pursue, because of the damaging effect that it believed removing

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<sup>25</sup> TNA: PRO T235/255, minutes of a meeting of the Reparations Committee, 12 April 1945, point 23.

civilians for compulsory labour service would have on the German population, particularly at a time when the Western Allies were attempting to encourage and appeal to democratic elements in Germany. At the very least, the conscription of German civilians for labour in Britain would involve drawing up new agreements regarding their conditions of work, wages and accommodation, as well as special codes for discipline and administration which would require international approval, as well as legislative sanction in Britain, neither of which would be swiftly or easily obtained.<sup>26</sup> Without these, according to the Minister of Labour and National Service, Britain 'would have to face the charge of being party to the enslavement of the German population', thereby providing a strong stimulus to resistance movements in the occupied territories.<sup>27</sup> The alternative, which Britain advocated, was therefore to employ only POWs, upon terms already laid down in the Geneva Convention – terms which, although now considered 'excessive as a safeguard', could be adjusted as the need arose.<sup>28</sup>

Another important consideration was whether or not the prisoner labourers should consist only, or primarily, of active Nazis. While a degree of uncertainty on the issue was expressed in April 1945, no doubt because the number of prisoners of the non-Nazi variety who would be available for labour in Britain had still to be assessed, within a month the government could confirm that the 250,000 additional German POWs now required 'should not include any ardent Nazis'.<sup>29</sup> This was because fewer guards would be required to supervise such prisoners, thus making the venture more profitable, while, it was hoped, the British public would be less fearful

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<sup>26</sup> TNA: PRO FO1032/858, memorandum of the Control Commission for Germany (CCG), London Branch, on 'Reparations Labour', 13 March 1946.

<sup>27</sup> TNA: PRO CO537/1320, minutes of a Cabinet discussion on Reparations Labour, 12 September 1945.

<sup>28</sup> TNA: PRO T236/255, Ministerial Committee Paper on matters to be discussed at the Moscow Reparations Commission, 26 April 1945.

<sup>29</sup> TNA: PRO FO1051/494, telegram from the CCG in London to Berlin, 24 May 1945.

of, and more likely to accept, non-Nazi German prisoners working in their communities.

The question was then asked as to whether or not Britain could impose these restrictions on the other Allies, particularly the Soviet Union, and, if not, whether Britain could take any responsibility for the way in which they used their labour, or, the Committee asked, 'do we wish to wash our hands of it?'.<sup>30</sup> It was decided that the preferred option was to persuade her Allies to recognise, as Britain intended, all German reparations workers as prisoners of war, since Russia had agreed under the terms of surrender to treat this category according to international standards, although not those of the Geneva Convention. If this assurance could not be obtained, the British delegation at Moscow was to propose that all countries taking reparations labour should sign a joint declaration agreeing to minimum standards of treatment with regard to food, accommodation, medical treatment, pay and period of service, which, based on what the Committee believed the Soviets were likely to accept, should be no longer than ten years. As for the number of workers to be extracted from Germany, ministers agreed at this stage that, since they had no knowledge of what the Allies were likely to demand (although there was little doubt that since the Russians had mentioned a figure of four million workers at the Tehran Conference they would be the principal claimant), no stipulation should be made and each country should submit a figure for consideration. Who ultimately would monitor the treatment of workers and the numbers taken was not given any detailed thought before the ARC met in June 1945, other than to stress that the declaration was to be purely voluntary

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<sup>30</sup> TNA: PRO T236/255, 26 April 1945.



and that 'His Majesty's Government can assume no responsibility for securing the enforcement in other countries of the conditions prescribed in such a declaration'.<sup>31</sup>

On the whole, Britain's proposal on labour reparations was rather vague and left much for discussion at Moscow, whilst, in some respects, reflecting changes that had taken place internationally since the Malkin Committee assembled in 1942. Indeed, many of the latter's proposals were now abandoned, perhaps the most startling change being that the suggested three-year time-limit on labour reparations was now replaced by the Russian demand for ten, in an effort, it would seem, to accommodate the Soviets' ever-increasing demands. In any case, as the Minister of Labour was later to point out, there was little sense at this stage in committing Britain to terms with which she might not be able to comply, and even less in compelling Russia to agree to standards which Britain knew she would not observe.<sup>32</sup> Hence, the British government, which, by May 1945, had lost those of its Labour ministers who might have taken a harder line on foreign labour issues, proceeded with the labour reparations policy in the knowledge that it was unlikely to receive any reliable assurance as to the terms under which the workers were to be employed – terms which might in any case reduce the reparations element of such labour.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the most important task for the government was to emphasise not the disadvantages but rather the potential economic advantages of employing German workers and to obtain commitments from all Allied leaders to include German labour in the reparations account, regardless, it would appear, of the consequences that this would have for human lives.

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<sup>31</sup> TNA: PRO FO1032/858, cited in the Directive for the United Kingdom Representative on the Moscow Commission on Reparations (Second Revised Draft).

<sup>32</sup> TNA: PRO CO537/1320, Memorandum by the Minister of Labour and National Service summarising the discussions at the Moscow ARC, 12 September 1945.

<sup>33</sup> Sir Alec Cairncross, *The Price of War*, 73. On 23 May 1945 the Coalition government came to an end in order that Attlee and his Labour ministers could prepare for the forthcoming general election. It was replaced by the largely Conservative 'Caretaker' government.

By the time the Allied Reparations Commission met at the end of June 1945, the Americans too had few delusions about what Stalin was likely to accept and no doubt recognised the futility of presenting a plan which would be instantly rejected by the Soviets while only adding to their frustration. However, they also understood that America herself had nothing to gain and much to lose by agreeing to Britain's proposal. Roosevelt, after all, had declared at Yalta in February that the Americans would have no need for German manpower after the war and, considering that the US delegation at Moscow had successfully negotiated a share of the reparations equal in total to Britain's, which was eventually agreed at twenty-two per cent, America was even more unlikely to agree to measures which involved compromising the value of this share by accepting a proportion of what she regarded as useless labour services.<sup>34</sup> The US delegation, therefore, opposed Britain's proposal on labour reparations even before it came up for general discussion between all leaders at the ARC, maintaining that public opinion in America and elsewhere would object to a policy involving the involuntary servitude of millions of Germans after the war had ended.<sup>35</sup> Instead, the US proposed that convicted war criminals, rather than prisoners of war or German civilians, should perform compulsory labour services outside Germany. Realising that without America's support there was little point in pressing the issue further, the British delegation allowed the whole matter to drop and the subject of labour reparations was not discussed, other than to agree to Russia's demand that the matter should again be deferred until a later date.<sup>36</sup>

Ultimately the Moscow Reparations Commission brought the Big Three no closer to a final agreement. When they met again at Potsdam in July and August 1945,

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<sup>34</sup> D.S. Clemens, *Yalta* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 159

<sup>35</sup> TNA: PRO FO1032/858, Minutes of a meeting of the Overseas Reconstruction Committee (ORC), 10 September 1945.

<sup>36</sup> TNA: PRO FO1051/494, Reparations Labour: Attitude of Her Majesty's Government, 6 March, 1946.

attempts to negotiate on the issue of reparations had become superfluous, particularly with regard to naming the total figure to be divided, because by this time Russia was already systematically stripping her zone of as much capital equipment as she could. In addition, while there was uncertainty in the West over exact numbers, the Soviets proceeded, as had been foreseen since Yalta, to transfer prisoners of war to Russia on a massive scale for labour purposes. There was no way in which Britain and America could check precisely what or who had been taken and no likelihood that the Soviets would supply a comprehensive and trustworthy account under either heading. The American delegation at Potsdam, supported by Britain, therefore proposed that each occupying power remove reparations solely from its own zone – a plan which not only made it unnecessary to name a figure for total reparations, as the British had hoped all along, but one which also had the advantage of allowing the Western Allies to remove what they wanted from their zones. Although, ultimately, this proposal did not form the basis of the Potsdam Agreement, whose clauses governing reparations reflected the Allies' inability to reach a consensus and were consequently incomplete, unrealistic and ambiguous, the removal of equipment, goods and men from Germany thereafter conformed to its principles.

In fact, the Allies never reached any agreement on the labour reparations issue, which was not mentioned in the Potsdam Declaration of 2 August 1945. It is, therefore, difficult to substantiate the charge that the labour reparations policy was of Britain's making, simply because, despite her efforts, there was no internationally agreed policy. However, Britain was guilty, as were other receiving countries, of taking silence on the issue as a sign of consent and proceeding anyway to transport German POWs, who effectively had become nothing more than 'war booty', for work

abroad.<sup>37</sup> In the absence of an international agreement, the number of men who could be removed was limited only by the numbers that could be transported and absorbed from the respective zones of occupation, and the Instrument of Unconditional Surrender ensured that, once these workers had been removed, there was no obligation to treat them according to any internationally agreed standard. This situation suited the Soviets, who had shown no disposition to keep the Control Council informed of what went on in Eastern Europe. Now, however, even Britain, frustrated throughout the summer of 1945 by her Allies' lack of commitment on this issue, was also able, unhindered, to remove as many German prisoners of war as she physically could from her zone for work in the United Kingdom. As Alec Cairncross later commented, it appeared that by 1945 'slavery, which had in past centuries been a traditional form of reparations, had returned to favour'.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Peter Nettle, 'German Reparations in the Soviet Empire', in *Foreign Affairs*, vol.29, October 1950 – July 1951, 300-307. 'War booty' refers to items removed ad hoc from a defeated country by the victor nation, which are not included in a reparations account. In the early post-war period the 'war booty' removed from Germany by the Soviets' 'trophy teams' ranged from 'telephone exchanges, railroad signalling equipment, public conveniences to private necessities'.

<sup>38</sup> Sir Alec Cairncross, *The Price of War*, 73.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Meeting the Demand for Reparations Labour, 1945-1946

The initial demand for reparations in the form of labour was communicated by the British government to the Control Commission for Germany (CCG) on 24 May, 1945.<sup>1</sup> Despite departmental requests for over half a million German prisoners of war, the 'bill' asked for 250,000 for work in construction and agriculture, none of whom, it was stipulated, should be so-called 'ardent' Nazis. While it was understood that the transfer of these men to Britain would be subject to shipping availability, and was therefore not likely to be imminent, there was nevertheless an element of confidence that the demand would eventually be met. After all, since there had been no international agreement on the issue of labour reparations, and therefore no legal restraints preventing Britain from taking what she needed, there was little, it seemed, to hinder the government carrying out its plans to bring more German POWs to the UK. Indeed, having rejected as 'quite unacceptable' the United States proposal to limit reparations labour to established war criminals, Britain's intention to extend the employment of German prisoners of war, 209,000 of whom were already held in the UK, was strongly maintained. By October 1945 the popular press was reassuring Britain's war-shattered public with the promise of 'Germans To Build Us Homes: 250,000 For The Job'.<sup>2</sup>

One major problem for Britain, however, was getting SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Expeditionary Force) to reserve, under the prevailing harsh

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<sup>1</sup> TNA: PRO FO1051/494, H.M. Government's Request for Reparations Labour to the CCG, 24 May 1945.

<sup>2</sup> *The Daily Express*, 15 October 1945.

conditions, a large enough 'pool' of prisoners on the Continent from which she could draw her new labour force. While millions of German soldiers had been held in 'open field' enclosures for a period after the surrender, the bulk of them - POWs, DEFs and SEPs not considered politically dangerous – were released on a 'ticket of leave' during the summer of 1945. According to a CCG (British Element) report, the result was that by December the number still held amounted to only 650,000 men, the majority of whom were to be found in categories deemed unsuitable for work in Britain, because, as already mentioned, the government had insisted that all reparations labourers in Britain should have prisoner of war status and that within this group there should be no 'ardent Nazis'.<sup>3</sup> Nor was there any hope of transferring suitable POWs from other Western zones of occupation, where the demand for prisoner labour was comparably high. Indeed, by June 1945, as well as the 250,000 prisoners asked for by Britain, SHAEF had received requests for two million for France, 45,000 for Belgium and 25,000 for Norway.<sup>4</sup> Not only, then, did Britain's 'bill' have to be adjusted to reflect the reality of the situation, but also, since there was no question of waiving the stated criteria altogether, careful consideration would have to be given to possible methods of increasing the number of German prisoners deemed to be suitable for deployment in Britain. None of this would prove an easy task and between the summers of 1945 and 1946 much of the correspondence between the CCG in Berlin and various departments of the British government conveys the frustration which all parties encountered in dealing with the matter.

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<sup>3</sup> TNA: PRO FO1032/858, CCG(BE), listing of (a) prisoners held in POW camps as of 12 December 1945: 78,000 Germans and 33,000 non-Germans, and (b) prisoners held in concentration areas in Germany: 164,000 dischargeable or transferable, 36,000 security categories, 93,000 non-Germans, 120,000 service units called *Dienstgruppen* under the Army and RAF, 42,000 naval personnel and 90,000 sick.

<sup>4</sup> Brian Loring Villa, 'The Diplomatic and Political Context of the POW Camps Tragedy' in Günter Bischof and Stephen Ambrose (eds.), *Eisenhower and the German POWs: Facts Against Falsehood* (London & Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 68.

The CCG was primarily concerned with coping with the difficult situation in post-war Germany and freeing itself, at least as far as possible, from the 'serious burden' of holding, for an indefinite period, thousands of POWs in German camps to meet the British demand for reparations labour in addition to those considered to be 'unsuitable'.<sup>5</sup> With winter approaching, which would exacerbate the problem of poor accommodation, and in addition the necessity of meeting the manpower requirement of 350 officers and 2000 men to administer 250,000 prisoners, the situation was one requiring urgent attention.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, in September 1945, the CCG(BE) demanded either authorisation from British government to negotiate for the 'disposal' of its prisoner holdings 'to any takers, either French or Russian', or alternatively that prisoners of all categories should be accepted as reparations labour, without reservations, or that the reparations 'bill' for the UK should be reduced.<sup>7</sup>

By March 1946, the CCG's demand had met with some success. In terms of numbers, the British authorities had to accept that various material factors in Germany meant that the number of prisoners of war available would not correspond to the numbers requested by Departments. Consequently, the scope of the labour reparations 'bill' was reduced to a demand for 160,000 German prisoners to be sent to the UK as soon as transport and accommodation became available. This decision was made easier by the sanctioning, on 14 February 1946, of a proposal to import 118,000 German POWs from Canada and the United States by the end of April – a reversal of an earlier policy decision which had been based upon the belief that the 'Americans', as these prisoners were later referred to, were likely to be disruptive following the reductions in pay and worsening material conditions which would inevitably

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<sup>5</sup> TNA: PRO FO1032/858, BGCC/80084/SEC.P, communication from T.B. Williamson, CCG(BE), to the Foreign Office, 15 September 1945.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

accompany such a move. However, a year had passed since that decision, and the government was not now entirely in a position to 'pick and choose' the components of its new labour force. Indeed, even if Britain were to receive the reduced quota of 160,000 additional prisoners from Germany, the whole matter of availability versus suitability would have to be reconsidered.

One way to increase Britain's chances of receiving this quota would have been to reverse, or at least modify, the government's decision to employ only non-Nazis as reparations labour and accept instead, as the Americans and French had already agreed to do, some of the 'black' prisoners currently being held on the Continent.<sup>8</sup> The CCG underlined some of the practical reasons why this recourse should be given urgent consideration. On the one hand a reversal of Britain's policy would enable the Control Commission to acquire additional 'politically reliable persons' for various types of work in Germany, not least to provide reinforcements for the new Civil Administration that was being established. On the other, the transfer of 'black' POWs to Britain would support the government's effort to suppress Nazism in Germany – the possibility of mass escapes there, in circumstances which would make recapture difficult, should not be overlooked. Moreover, if Britain, the CCG argued, continued to repatriate only 'black' POWs, it would logically follow that 'white' prisoners might find that the easy way home would be simply to change their 'colour'.<sup>9</sup>

The CCG(BE) also highlighted the political importance of reversing the decision to transfer only non-Nazi prisoners to Britain, since, from the time of the surrender, it had become increasingly concerned about the consequences that this policy was

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<sup>8</sup> TNA: PRO FO1051/494, communication from the CCG(BE), London, to the War Office regarding 'German Prisoners of War in the UK', 9 July 1945. 'Black' prisoners were those who it was felt had been most imbued with the National Socialist ethos; 'white' prisoners were considered by the Allies to be politically reliable and those placed in the 'grey' category were prisoners who displayed no specific political commitment. For a fuller discussion of the 'colour-coding' of POWs, see below, Chapter Six, 13 ff.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.



having for Germany and the German people. Indeed, on 12 February, 1946, the CCG notified the British government that German opinion was becoming sensitive on the removal of prisoners for reparations labour outside Germany while those imprisoned, interned or dismissed because of their Nazi affiliations were exempt.<sup>10</sup> A few weeks later, on 1 March, the Manpower Division of the British Control Commission sent the government documentary 'evidence' of this ill-feeling in the form of a declaration issued jointly by the CDU (*Christlich Demokratische Union* - Christian Democratic Union) and KPD (*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* - Communist Party of Germany) in Cologne:

#### Declaration

The German People bear the misfortune into which the crimes of Hitler's Government have precipitated them with calm, with resignation and dignity.

It knows that it will have to provide reparations for the terrible destruction and laying waste of other countries. It knows, too, that in its own land work must be performed for reconstruction of and for the maintenance of its own people.

But large sections of the population view the future with grave misgivings. If nowadays you go through the factories or, with an observant eye, through the countryside you see none but veterans at work. Even people of 40 are an exception. As a rule you will find men between 50 and 70. Their capacity is reduced also by the prevailing food situation. The young men lie on the battlefields, are terribly injured or imprisoned. Therefore the German people desires and expresses this desire to the Inter-Allied Commission that the prisoners of war may, as soon as feasible, be released and sent home, unless they are tainted by war – and Hitler-crimes. The prisoners of war together with all others engaged in productive activity shall re-establish industrial and economic life in order to provide those goods which must be produced for reparations, and, furthermore, those articles which are required for the livelihood of the population.

To some sections of foreign countries the question is often debated that German prisoners of war should not be released until the reconstruction of destroyed territories is guaranteed and that in other branches of production (mining etc.) they should also serve for reparations purposes. These ideas are understandable but it seems very hard indeed and not necessary. Many of these unfortunates who were forcibly recruited into the Armed Forces and took part in the war only because they had to have by now been separated for six or seven years from their families. If they were to perform forced labour for an even longer period now, the younger generation would find itself completely 'derailed' and the family life of married people would be entirely undermined and destroyed.

Such a dissolution of the German people is not, so at least we believe, desired by the Military Government. It must not be forgotten what new dangers this would conjure up. We venture to submit other proposals which would guarantee reconstruction abroad and which would at the same time comply with our wishes for Germany and her future.

In the name of a large section of our people we submit to the High Inter-Allied Commission the desire and request that in the place of the war prisoners who should be released they will 'rope in' the active Party members both in town and country some of whom now roam about camouflaged and pretending that they had never harmed anyone. All S.S. men, unless they were forcibly conscripted into

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 'The Inclusion of Nazis in Reparations Labour for the UK', 12 February 1946.

it, all S.A., all the leading people in labour service, the functionaries who filled leading positions in other bodies, these should be used for production and reconstruction in destroyed countries.

These millions, unless they are to be condemned as actual war criminals, should earn their living on foreign soil instead of being fed and 'dragged along' by the German people. There will be enough of them to replace the prisoners of war. The latter will be given back hope that they may be able to feed and look after their families.

By means of Police investigation in town and country and by threatening severest penalties (also by using the political parties and their local communities) it will be possible to get hold of the people in question.

Even now the Hitler criminals are once more threatening democracy, the Germany which is to be rebuilt and indeed Europe, by their whispering propaganda and secret conclaves. Laughing defiantly they go about convinced that nothing, after all, can happen to them. They are still there and none the wiser than before. But we have had enough of them. It is their fault and their fault only that Europe's young manhood has bled itself to death on the battlefields. They have taken millions of men, Germans as well as foreigners of every creed, of every race, dragged them into concentration camps there to debase, violate and murder them. They have torn Germans and foreigners from their families, compelled them into forced labour in factories, in the country, in fortification belts and under conditions which are a mockery of any sort of culture.

The raided lands as well as the German people themselves were held – and the latter for 13 years, in mental and physical slavery.

If the whole of the German nation must atone for the Nazi crimes we want the instigators and accomplices of these iniquities to be particularly called to answer for them. We emphasise once again, unless they receive some other penalty, they should be sent out for reparations. They will suffer no worse a fate than they themselves decreed for millions of human beings.

We are not led by the feelings of revenge; it is justice which we seek.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, the continued employment of civil servants and officials who had served under Hitler's administration, as well as the involvement of ex-Party members, German ex-officers, soldiers and experts in Germany's post-war economic organisation hardly made sense to those awaiting the return of loved ones, who they considered were being punished for doing nothing more than obeying orders, a state of affairs which only served to rub salt into an already festering wound and to fuel a sense of moral injustice. However, the declaration also underlined the German people's concern with regard to how their desperate need for food, fuel and manufactured goods could be met with a depleted workforce - a situation which, it seemed, was made worse by the absence of thousands of young, able-bodied and, as they saw it, 'innocent' prisoners of war.

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<sup>11</sup> TNA: PRO FO1032/858, 'Inclusion of Nazis in Reparations Labour for UK'. The translated Declaration was attached to a letter from the Manpower Division of the CCG(BE) to F.W. Clarke, Deputy Secretary, Chief of Staff's Office (BZ), Lübeck, 1 March 1946.

In view of the urgent need for labour in certain key industries in Germany, it is not surprising that Britain's policy of continuing to ship suitably screened German POWs to the UK was regarded as 'unsound' by individuals from both within and outside the British zone of occupation.<sup>12</sup> By the middle of 1946 the German coal industry, for example, was in a critical state, producing approximately only a half of its pre-war figure.<sup>13</sup> Since coal was an essential fuel for the running of other industries, particularly steel, this decline had detrimental consequences for overall industrial production in the zone, which, by 1 March 1946, was estimated to be only about fifteen per cent of the area's pre-war level. The dramatic reduction in output of coal was linked directly to the physical deterioration of the mining workforce caused by the prevailing food shortages. Between July 1945 and March 1946 miners were granted a diet of 3,400 calories per day. This amount was cut back to 2,900 per day on 4 March 1946 at a critical time for the food supply in the zone and was restored again to the 3,400 calories per day in June of that year. However, although Control officials regarded this as a sufficient level of food to sustain a man engaged in heavy work, they had not allowed for the fact that, since others who were not so engaged were having to survive on 1,000 calories per day, miners were sharing their rations with their families and as a result often ate less than the minimum required for their strenuous work.<sup>14</sup>

The resulting physical deterioration and absenteeism of the miners led the North German Coal Control, an inter-Allied authority, to demand the conscription of all physically fit men between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five for work in the mines.

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<sup>12</sup> Hansard HOC, col.1398, 10 May 1946.

<sup>13</sup> Robert W. Carden, 'Before Bizonia: Britain's Economic Dilemma in Germany, 1945-46' in *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 14, no.1, January 1979, 535-555. While the average daily output for each Ruhr coal miner in 1938 had been 1.5 tons, it was only 0.86 tons during 1946.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

Popular resistance to this measure meant, however, that it had little positive effect: as one British journalist recorded in May 1946:

When the [conscription] Commission reached Wilhelmshaven there was nearly a riot. The town had been on work for the British Navy; when the shipbuilding yard was destroyed [by the removal of plant for reparations] there was mass unemployment and widespread discontent. An opportunity for the Commission! It ordered a quota of 500 men for the mines from Wilhelmshaven, but when the Labour Exchange Manager instructed the selected men to go they objected so violently that he had to call in police protection.

Despite the secrecy, the news of the Wilhelmshaven riot spread like wildfire, and in all the neighbouring districts the men between eighteen and thirty-five years began to disappear.<sup>15</sup>

The magnitude of the problem of crippling shortages of food, coal and consumer goods in Germany put an enormous strain on the Occupation authorities. The greatest obstacle to relieving the shortages in the Western zones was the destruction of German economic unity, and hence, of economic balance between the different regions and sectors of the national economy. The industries of central Germany which had previously provided the West with manufactured goods, parts and tools in exchange for coal were now located in the Soviet zone. In addition, since the country's main food producing areas before the war were in the north, the centre and especially the east, when the Soviets established their zone of occupation in 1945 these were largely cut off from the rest of the Germany.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, what made this imbalance worse was the fact that the population in the Western zones had risen as a result of thousands of refugees and displaced persons pouring in from Poland, the Soviet zone and the east, to the point where in 1946 there were 46 million people to feed compared with 40 million for the same area in 1939.<sup>17</sup> Wartime occupation plans drawn up by the Allies had not provided for such conditions, nor had they predicted

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<sup>15</sup> Fenner Brockway, cited in Robert Carden, 'Before Bizonia'.

<sup>16</sup> Dennis L. Bark and David R. Gress, *A History of West Germany (second edition), Volume I: From Shadow to Substance 1945-1963* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 128-135.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

the unwillingness of the Soviet Union to allow any free flow of foodstuffs from its predominantly agricultural zone.

The food shortages in the Western zones became the greatest source of misery for the German people and the occupation authorities after 1945. While severe rationing in Britain at the end of the war meant that British citizens only received around 2,400 calories a day, the dire food crisis in Germany had resulted in the British authorities having to set the daily calorie intake in their zone at a meagre 1,550 for 'normal' (non-labouring adult) Germans.<sup>18</sup> However, because of unevenness in the distribution of goods throughout the zone, for some areas even this amount was unsustainable. In July 1945, for example, adults in the city of Essen received only 700 to 800 calories a day, which is reported to have approximated to the ration of inmates in Soviet or Nazi concentration camps.<sup>19</sup> Overall, it soon became apparent that the food available was not even sufficient to meet the standard of 1,550 calories a day and from March 1946 a cut of 500 calories daily was imposed.<sup>20</sup> The result was that between 1945 and 1947 most Germans lived in a constant state of emaciated exhaustion. Thousands died and others fell victim to disease and malnutrition.<sup>21</sup>

The situation created a vicious circle for the British authorities, who understood that it would be impossible to develop the zone's industrial and agricultural potential with a depleted and undernourished workforce. One solution was to import foodstuffs and other goods into the zone from abroad on a large scale - a particularly sore point for the Western Allies who were having to observe the Soviets removing food from the eastern zone as reparations. In May 1946, while the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Hugh Dalton, told the Cabinet that since VE day the UK had received less than £2

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<sup>18</sup> Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls and Consumption 1939-1955* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 45.

<sup>19</sup> Bark and Gress, *From Shadow to Substance*, 130-1.

<sup>20</sup> Robert W. Carden, 'Before Bizonia'.

<sup>21</sup> Bark and Gress, *From Shadow to Substance*, 131.

million from German exports and reparations deliveries, the Control Commission estimated that the bill for imports into the British zone in 1946 would reach £91 million, £59 million of which would go on food alone.<sup>22</sup> This figure was in addition to the cost of administration and military occupation, which was put at £110 million for 1946-7.<sup>23</sup> Based on these approximations, the UK would have to extend credit to Germany to the total value of £200 million for this period. Needless to say, this promised to be an enormous financial drain on Great Britain.

Consequently, the government faced harsh questioning in the House of Commons regarding its policy of transporting German POWs to Britain when, it was argued, they would be of more benefit to Germany and, therefore, to Britain if they were put to work in their own country. Indeed, during a debate on 10 May 1946 it was pointed out that Britain had been burdened with an economic liability which it was unable to sustain without large imports, and in addition to which the British taxpayer was being called upon to pay extortionate occupation costs: it was, according to Michael Foot, Labour Member for Plymouth, 'the most futile enterprise upon which any people have embarked since the building of the Pyramids'. For others, notably R. Stokes, Labour Member of Parliament for Ipswich, who championed the cause of German POWs in the House throughout the period of their captivity in the UK, the entire situation made no sense at all. During another debate on post-war Germany, in July 1946, he expressed his frustration as follows:

Looking at it from the economic point of view, they [the prisoners of war] are wanted in Germany for the rebuilding of the country, and getting the country going again. Here we are, short of labour, with an Army standing over there; yet we keep these prisoners of war over here to do the jobs which our men over there ought to be brought back here to do. That is another bit of crazy economics.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Alec Cairncross, *The Price of War: British Policy on German Reparations 1941-1949* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1986), 151.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Hansard HOC, 29 July 1946, col. 604.

The realisation that Germany's fuel shortage was one of the most powerful factors delaying her recovery, as well as official pressure both from within the British Zone of Occupation and Parliament, forced the government to respond. After all, the success of 'Operation Barleycorn', which had involved the release of some 300,000 prisoners in the British Zone to gather crops during the summer of 1945, made it difficult to argue against the implementation of similar schemes to assist in the recovery of other essential industries. Therefore, while decisions had already been taken by the end of 1945 to exempt German coal-miners from impressments in the UK, under 'Operation Coalscuttle', which had led to a 'combing' through POW camp inmates in Germany and Belgium, measures were also introduced to provide for the repatriation of 'white' POWs domiciled in the British Zone of Occupation whose skills and qualifications in a number of fields, including mining, were needed by the CCG.<sup>25</sup> However, the 'Oberon' scheme, as it was officially referred to, only resulted in the return of around 400 POWs from Britain to Germany by May 1946, a meagre response and one which was accompanied by the demand for 'suitable' replacements on a head for head basis so as to ensure that Britain's own need for POW labour continued to be met.<sup>26</sup>

Overall, therefore, the British government was determined to abide by its decision to continue to refuse Nazi German POWs for work in the UK. It argued that since this decision had been reached in consultation with the French and American governments it would be impossible to depart from it without again consulting them.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, even if Britain received the consent of her Western Allies, the War

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<sup>25</sup> TNA: PRO FO051/494, letter addressed to Mr Morgan, April 1946.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 'Reparations Labour', table listing numbers of prisoners available for work in the UK (no date).

<sup>27</sup> TNA: PRO FO1032/858, letter from A.W. Street of the Control Office for Germany and Austria in London to Lieutenant-General Sir Brian H. Robertson, 23 March 1946.

Office had already strongly opposed such a policy departure on the basis that it was not prepared to accept any additional commitment involved in guarding 'black' prisoners in the UK.<sup>28</sup> There was also no question of 'roping in', as the CDU/KPD declaration had suggested, civilians in Germany with dubious antecedents for reparations work in Britain because special administrative procedures and disciplinary codes would require to be framed for the employment of such individuals, all of which could only be achieved after lengthy negotiations for which there was simply no time - Britain needed more workers urgently.

In an attempt to justify its policy, the government insisted that work carried out by prisoners of war in Great Britain, particularly in the production of food, ultimately benefited Germany and the German economy while simultaneously easing pressure on the public purse in the UK. In addition, it was argued, prisoners brought over to Britain were being saved from their 'miserable lives' in Germany where 'they would have a far worse fate...than they have in this country'.<sup>29</sup> Of course, there was an element of truth in this. However, it must also be said that thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of prisoners captured by the British in 1945, who were either already in the UK or awaiting transfer there, were extremely anxious about their families and were desperate to return home. This was particularly true of those prisoners whose wives and children were among the 14 million people fleeing or being expelled at short notice from East Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia.<sup>30</sup> Vast numbers were arriving daily in the Western Zones with few possessions, no shelter, no 'breadwinner' and no one to look after them. It was a tragic human crisis of enormous

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Hansard HOC, cols. 547-548, P. Noel-Baker speaking in a debate on Germany and Austria, 29 July 1946.

<sup>30</sup> Adrian Webb, *Germany Since 1945* (London: Longman, 1998), 235. Webb states that of these 14 million refugees 2 million were from pre-war Poland, 3 million from the Sudetenland, 4.5 million from Silesia, 2 million from East Prussia and 1 million from East Pomerania.



proportions and the administrative task of identifying and reuniting families with prisoners was regarded by the government as simply 'too difficult' under the prevailing conditions. Moreover, as one critic pointed out, drawing the public's attention to such issues might in any case have proved 'inconvenient' for the War Office by opening the way for harsh questioning on the morality and even the legality of holding prisoners of war after the end of hostilities, as well as giving rise to public demands for their immediate repatriation. Of course, such questions were repeatedly raised in Parliament and in public during the course of 1946 and beyond, but during the first half of that year the government resisted pressure, giving priority instead to the practical needs of Great Britain: the human as well as moral aspects of the situation were put to one side.

Indeed, despite sound reasons for returning them, it was ministers who ultimately decided that German POWs would be put to better use in the UK where their labour would boost Britain's productive capacity, thus helping the Treasury to meet spiralling costs at home and abroad. In addition, their impressment in agriculture meant that prisoners would be producing food for the British people whose morale, as a result, would be improved. While this may have appeared to be a case of 'crazy economics' to some, the government was of the belief that whether POWs under their control were repatriated or not would change little regarding Britain's level and period of commitment to the administration of the British Zone of Occupation, which included the maintenance of some 30,000 staff who by July 1946 were employed in the zone and the supply of food to Germany's starving population.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, regardless of any paradoxical element in the enterprise, British officials concentrated their thoughts on the development of strategies designed to ensure that Britain

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<sup>31</sup> Robert Carden, 'Before Bizonia'.

received her stipulated quota of 160,000 suitably screened prisoners for work in Britain during the summer of 1946.

As a result, the CCG(BE) found itself under increasing pressure. Unable to hold sufficient POW reserves on the Continent, it too considered alternative ways to satisfy Britain's labour requirements while avoiding the 'disastrous consequences' associated with overcrowding and limited resources in the camps.<sup>32</sup> Central to the discussions between the government and the CCG towards the end of 1945 and during the first few months of 1946 was the idea that Britain should consider using Germans other than those categorised as prisoners of war for reparations labour in the UK and, moreover, the question of whether or not it would be possible to alter the status of certain groups in order for them to qualify for such work. Both suggestions implied significant departures from policies that had been formulated towards the end of the war, when the government had vowed to take only prisoners of war existing at the time of surrender for reparations labour, while maintaining that other members of the German armed forces not taken as prisoners of war at that time, and instead given the status of Surrendered Enemy Personnel (SEPs), would be released and not so utilised.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, such a departure contravened a SHAEF directive issued in 1945, which specified that those included in this last category could not have prisoner-of-war status imposed on them at a later stage.<sup>34</sup>

The correspondence between Britain and the Control Commission regarding this issue serves to remind us of the fact that under the conditions of Total Surrender such undertakings were not viewed as insurmountable obstacles: they could be altered according to need. Consequently, since there seemed to be no satisfactory alternative,

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<sup>32</sup> TNA: PRO FO1032/858, CCG(BE), telegram regarding reparations labour, 12 December 1946.

<sup>33</sup> TNA: PRO T236/255, Ministerial Committee Meeting minutes, 26 April 1945.

<sup>34</sup> TNA: PRO CO537/1320: a telegram from the Combined Administrative Committee to SHAEF cites directive FACS 198, paragraph 3, 9 May 1945.

detailed thought was given to the prospect of acquiring ex-*Wehrmacht* soldiers, who were not currently classified as prisoners of war, for work in Britain. Included in a proposal submitted by the Control Commission to the British government on 12 December 1945 was a suggestion for the call-up of 50,000 men who had been released on 'ticket-of-leave' for work in Germany under the Barleycorn scheme, for the transfer of 50,000 SEPs employed in German labour battalions, called *Dienstgruppen*, under the control of the Army and RAF, and a request that the British government should persuade Norway to return 40,000 German POWs to the British Zone of Occupation, from where, instead of being discharged, they could be shipped to the UK as reparations labour.<sup>35</sup>

It soon became apparent, however, that there were serious problems associated with all aspects of this plan. In the first instance, a scheme which necessarily involved removing from their homes men who had been released by the British authorities in the early post-war months because of their good conduct and lack of association with the Nazi Party, and re-imposing prisoner status upon them, would be bound to cause widespread resentment. Moreover, such an operation would require a considerable amount of administration as well as security control measures for which the Military Government had insufficient British staff. This meant that the CCG would have to rely heavily on Germans who, it was felt, would be likely to co-operate more effectively if Britain would consider including Nazis first as candidates for reparations labour and only make up any shortfall in numbers with 'ticket-of-leave' men who had 'no stain on their character'.<sup>36</sup> This 'deliberate gesture of policy' by the British government would, according to the Deputy Military Governor in Berlin, 'ease

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<sup>35</sup> TNA: PRO FO1032/858, Reparations Labour, 12 December 1945.

<sup>36</sup> TNA: PRO FO1051/494, letter from CCG(BE) to the Control Office for Germany and Austria, London, 12 February 1946.



our task of collecting 'ticket-of-leave' men off the streets in Germany'.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, in order to meet Britain's criteria at least in part, the Political Division of the British Army of the Rhine (BAOR) even mooted the possibility of enrolling those members of the civilian population with a Nazi past into the Disarmed German Forces in order that they could be converted into prisoners of war and therefore become eligible for inclusion as reparations labour.<sup>38</sup> However, officials in Germany acknowledged that the creation of the machinery necessary to implement such measures would be accompanied by 'grave political objections' and decided not to pursue the idea further, while the War Office persistently maintained that the problems associated with bringing Nazis to Britain were, in any case, 'insurmountable'.<sup>39</sup>

Re-imposing POW status on 'ticket-of-leave' men, on the other hand, was understood by the CCG as a formality that could be easily achieved through 'the simple process of cancelling their Ticket of Leave'.<sup>40</sup> The main concern for the Occupation authorities, it seems, was how to ensure that a sufficient number of ex-prisoners actually responded to the call-up. One of the questions debated was whether or not any proclamation that was issued should offer the inducement of better living conditions in Britain. As the BAOR Chief of Staff wrote to the Manpower Division of the CCG(BE) on 20 June 1946:

It has been suggested recently that the call up might not be so unpopular as was at one time thought, in that the men going to the UK would get decently fed, housed and employed, whereas in Germany for some time to come food and housing will be deficient and unemployment figures are likely to rise. To an unattached man there are the advantages of seeing a new country and learning a new language. They will also not be away from Germany indefinitely.

It is well known throughout Germany that there are a number of PW employed in UK for Reparations Labour, and letters are frequently received from them. As far as is known

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> TNA: PRO FO1032/858, correspondence from Chief of Staff, BAOR, to CCG(BE) regarding the 'Supply of Reparations Labour to UK', 13 March 1946.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., correspondence from Control Commission for Germany and Austria to CCG(BE), 4 May 1946.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

here there has not been any popular outcry against Reparations Labour; in fact there has been at least one case of men volunteering for Reparations Labour.

If we have a call up, what we would like to do would be to call up by batches in groups alphabetically, passing men straight to *Münsterlager* and *Eselheide* in small numbers. It seems to be for consideration whether we should not make a point of advertising the fact that they are going to UK for labour, as there appears some possibility that if we did so some volunteers would come forward.<sup>41</sup>

There was, of course, a considerable degree of misplaced optimism in such thinking. After all, while material advantages might have been an inducement, they were more than counterbalanced by the fact that they could only be enjoyed behind barbed wire. Given, therefore, that blatant advertising would be likely to cause the opposite of the desired effect, thought was given to the possibility of ‘testing the water’ by questioning Germans on the issue. This idea, however, was also rejected since it was felt that such a course would run the risk of ‘springing’ the scheme before the call-up was ready to be announced, thereby giving sufficient time for the planning of evasion tactics. Realising that its chances of success appeared slim and the prospect of antagonising an already volatile general public too great, the British authorities at home and in Germany abandoned their plan to call up ‘ticket-of-leave’ men and the issue of numbers of POWs required for reparations labour was re-examined.<sup>42</sup>

The CCG’s proposal to supply Britain with 50,000 of the 120,000 ex-German soldiers currently held in the service units called *Dienstgruppen*, also flew in the face of earlier British policy decisions. These prisoners were not POWs but had been categorised as Surrendered Enemy Personnel and, as already mentioned, could not, according to the SHAEF directive of May 1945, have their status altered. Again, however, the CCG appeared willing to resort to desperate measures to meet Britain’s

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<sup>41</sup> TNA: PRO F01051/494, ‘Call Up of Ticket of Leave Men’. Correspondence from Lt.Col. H.P. Mackley, BAOR, to Manpower Division, CCG(BE), 20 June 1946.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

pressing demands, advising that, although members of the *Dienstgruppen* did not currently meet the criteria for reparations labour in the UK, they could, if the War Office so wished, be converted to prisoners-of-war status for the purpose.<sup>43</sup>

This was no doubt an attractive proposition to the British government. However, it is difficult to gauge whether the CCG presented this possibility as part of a strategy simply designed to pacify those in London making the demands. As with the plan to call up 'ticket-of-leave' men, providing Britain with 50,000 members of the *Dienstgruppen* was a commitment that the CCG was unlikely to be able to meet because these men were currently engaged in vital reconstruction work in Germany. Indeed, there was little that was predictable in post-war Germany since conditions there altered almost on a daily basis and, particularly with regard to the volume and availability of manpower, it was impossible to give any guarantees. It comes as no surprise to learn, therefore, that only three months after making its offer the CCG informed the Control Office for Germany and Austria in London that the numbers obtainable from this group would not be as large as hoped, due, in part, to an unexpectedly high number of desertions that had taken place from the relevant units during the preceding months.<sup>44</sup> In addition, by June 1946 the CCG was talking of the 'undesirability' of holding *Dienstgruppen* in Germany for reparations work in Britain: a U-turn in attitude which was the result of the British Control Commission's need to tread cautiously in its dealings with its Soviet counterpart.

Indeed, since the end of 1945 the CCG had been forced, due to an acute shortage of British personnel in the zone, to place the *Dienstgruppen* under the supervision of their own administrative staff. Consequently, even though Soviet treatment of German

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<sup>43</sup> TNA: PRO FO1032/858, CCG(BE) memorandum to War Office regarding Reparations Labour, 12 December 1945.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. Letter to Lt. Gen. Sir Brian H. Robertson from A.W. Street, Control Office for Germany and Austria, 'Reparations Labour', 23 March 1946.

prisoners was veiled in secrecy, there was nevertheless concern that the Russians, as well as the Americans, might be suspicious of this arrangement, believing that Britain was harbouring in its zone some sort of German military formation.<sup>45</sup> As well as running the risk of prejudicing future general co-operation between the Allies, the presence of German ex-military service units in the British zone of occupation raised the question as to how the Russians in particular would respond. In February 1946 a meeting of Foreign Office ministers concluded that if Britain's retention of these *Dienstgruppen* was used as an excuse by the Soviet Union for not reducing its own forces of occupation, then all the SEPs in the British zone 'should be got out of the way'.<sup>46</sup> However, it was pointed out that their immediate disbandment should be avoided and that the release of these men could instead be orchestrated in such a way as to offer some advantages. Indeed, Foreign Office officials considered the possibility of using members of the *Dienstgruppen* as bargaining tools with which to secure the reduction of the forces of occupation in the Soviet zone - one of Britain's prime objectives.<sup>47</sup>

By March 1947, one year after these discussions, there were still 81,000 SEPs working in labour formations in Germany under their own officers on such tasks as mine clearing and tree-felling.<sup>48</sup> From this it would appear, therefore, that members of the *Dienstgruppen* had not been made available on a large scale for work in the UK. Nor, however, had the hopes and intentions of the Foreign Office been realised, since the Soviets had no plan to withdraw troops from their zone. Indeed, it comes as no surprise considering his trade union history, that the British Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, was, according to Allan Bullock, 'nettled to discover' that so many men were

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid. CCG(BE) to War Office, Reparations Labour, 12 December 1945.

<sup>46</sup> TNA: PRO FO1020/765, Minutes of meeting held 5 February 1946, 'Disposal of Displaced Persons and Surrendered Enemy Personnel'.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Allan Bullock, *Ernest Bevin: Foreign Secretary, 1945-1951* (London: Heinemann, 1983), 376.

still held in these labour battalions, which suggests that somewhere along the way the ideas of February 1946 had all but been forgotten. Following his discovery, which occurred during the Moscow Conference of Foreign Ministers in March and April 1947, Bevin asked for the Prime Minister's authority to dissolve the *Dienstgruppen* by the end of 1947, once again on the grounds that 'nothing would persuade the Russians they were not a military formation'.<sup>49</sup>

The third significant part of the CCG's proposal involved the transfer to Britain of some of the 40,000 German POWs held in Norway. Since 10,000 of these were to be retained as labourers by the Norwegian authorities and a further 7,000 consisted of war criminals and other arrestable categories, this left a potential pool of 23,000 men suitable for work in Britain.<sup>50</sup> Discussions between the Control Commission in Norfolk House, London, and the CCG in the British Zone continued on this subject until May 1946, during which time the latter again stressed the difficulty it would have in holding these prisoners for an indefinite period in the already overcrowded POW discharge centres in Belgium, where disease and under-nourishment had already resulted in a 'heavy wastage in PWs earmarked' for reparations labour in Britain.<sup>51</sup> In addition, the CCG had to consider the fact that 7,000 of the prisoners coming from Norway would not be 'earmarked' for labour purposes and would have to be retained in camps in the British Zone.

The British government again had to review the feasibility of this proposed arrangement. There was no getting away from the fact that the eleven British-run camps in Belgium were vastly overstretched, having, in the last quarter of 1945, to meet the demands of 200,000 prisoners but with an official capacity of only

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> TNA: PRO FO1032/858, message from the Control Commission for Germany and Austria to CCG(BE), 'Transfer of German PW from Norway', 11 January 1946.

<sup>51</sup> TNA: PRO FO1051/494, CCG(BE) to Control Commission for Germany and Austria, London (undated).



150,000.<sup>52</sup> At one of the camps, *Overyssche*, conditions were so bad that during this three month period 200 men died of dysentery and, according to one of the camp's inmates, the camp authorities found it necessary to issue an order prohibiting prisoners from eating grass.<sup>53</sup> There were also reports that many of the inmates had the definite impression that the treatment, both moral and physical, that they were subjected to in the Belgian camps was carried out on high authority as a punitive measure and that protests were to no avail, apart from eliciting the assertion from the authorities that the Geneva Convention no longer applied.<sup>54</sup>

The prisoners were 'white', non-Nazis and they could have contributed positively to Germany's economic and political renewal. Instead they were forcibly detained until 1946 in Belgium whilst their physical state continued to decline. They languished in the camps until it became possible to ship them across the Channel to Britain where they would help to meet the country's manpower requirements. When the sight of prisoners arriving in British ports from the Belgian camps in a state of severe under-nourishment was brought to the attention of the British public it caused great embarrassment to the government and led to demands in the press for a public enquiry into the matter. Referring to what seemed to be the inhumane treatment of German POWs by British Army personnel, *The Times* announced:

To all in this country, but perhaps especially to those who remember the reputation for fairness, humanity and discipline made by the British Army of Occupation after the First World War, it is distressing that there should be even the slightest suspicion of such practices.<sup>55</sup>

There had been reluctance in some military quarters to accept that Britain was not acting humanely, and a corresponding tendency to view the bad reports as

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<sup>52</sup> M.B. Sullivan, *Thresholds of Peace: four Hundred Thousand German Prisoners of War and the People of Britain, 1944-1948* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1977), 21.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>54</sup> TNA: PRO ADM 228/67 B/3244, complaints regarding poor conditions of British-run POW camps in Belgium, 9 April 1947.

<sup>55</sup> *The Times*, 29 May 1946.

exaggerations. ‘One of the main difficulties’, reported a member of the camp administrative authorities at *Overyssche*, ‘appears to be an absence of the “will to live” among certain of these men with the result that they mope in the corner and eventually die’.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, the government could not deny that the men in these camps had suffered terribly under British supervision and, while there was no doubt a variety of factors contributing to the poor conditions in Belgium, the situation there warranted an investigation. It was discovered that although a shortage of food was a primary factor, there were also significant inadequacies in camp organisation.<sup>57</sup> The main fault had been with the British officers in the camp who left the administration of supplies to inexperienced juniors. Without proper supervision, the latter had been careless about sending in the correct indentures.<sup>58</sup> In addition, it was reported that the ‘black market’ habits of some of the camp staff, as well as a certain willingness among them to ‘let the Germans stew in their own juice for a while’, had contributed significantly to the problem.<sup>59</sup> The War Office concluded that the treatment of the POWs in Belgium had been ‘an unpardonable contravention of our duties under the Geneva Convention’.<sup>60</sup>

Decisions, therefore, had to be taken which would limit any damage that might already have been done to Britain’s prestige at home and abroad, particularly in Germany, through what appeared to many to be the treatment of German prisoners of war ‘à la Belsen’.<sup>61</sup> In addition, the government sought to alleviate the adverse effects that the low morale of these prisoners and the stories that they told fellow inmates in the British camps of their experiences in Belgium would have on the general mood

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<sup>56</sup> TNA: PRO ADM228/67 13/244, report from Camp 2226, *Overyssche*, 23 April 1946.

<sup>57</sup> M.B. Sullivan, *Thresholds of Peace*, 32.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> TNA: PRO ADM228/67 13/3244, 9 April 1946.

within Britain's existing POW labour force.<sup>62</sup> Although it had no consequences for the actual fate of the prisoners themselves, one of these measures was to curb official language when referring to the treatment of German POWs, 'lest we should lay ourselves open to the very grave charges of holding prisoners akin to those of Buchenwald and Belsen'.<sup>63</sup> Suggested amendments included:

- (1) For 'incarcerated' read 'held'.
- (2) For 'the conditions are undoubtedly bad' read 'the conditions as reported would certainly appear bad'.<sup>64</sup>

Another measure was designed to protect Britain's reputation by avoiding sending more POWs to the camps in Belgium, including the prisoners from Norway. Following communications between the London branch of the Control Commission and the CCG(BE) in Berlin, the latter was asked to open negotiations with the Russians for the direct shipment of the German POWs from Norway to a port in the Soviet Zone in order to relieve Britain of this pressure.

Again, this decision held little promise of a better future for the prisoners themselves. However, in Britain there was now even more uncertainty over the possibility of satisfying demand for POW labour. In May 1946, the BAOR Headquarters duly issued a statement, prepared in consultation with the Manpower Division of the CCG(BE), advising the London Branch of the Control Commission that there was little likelihood of its being able to supply the UK with the required 160,000 prisoners and that 125,000 was a more realistic figure under the prevailing circumstances.<sup>65</sup> It was hoped, since by the beginning of May the Ministry of Labour had obtained a 'windfall' in the form of 31,000 additional POWs who had been sent directly from America to the UK, that the government would readily accept this

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<sup>62</sup> MSS.292/881.423/8 T2147, 'German POWs in British Hands: Some facts and suggestions', 1 July 1946.

<sup>63</sup> TNA: PRO ADM/228/67 13/3244, 9 April 1946.

<sup>64</sup> TNA: PRO ADM/228/67 B3244, 3 April 1946.

<sup>65</sup> TNA: PRO FO1032/858, letter from Control Commission for Germany and Austria, London, to Deputy Military Governor BAOR, 4 May 1946.

reduced quota.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, the CCG also stressed that an urgent review was needed of the prisoner-categories deemed suitable for reparations labour in Britain, since the sources from which even 125,000 could be drawn would vary considerably from those used in previous calculations due to sickness, difficulties in calling up ticket-of-leave men and the 'undesirability' of using *Dienstgruppen*.

From the end of March 1946 'Operation Fox' became the code word associated with the transfer of German POWs to the UK.<sup>67</sup> According to a progress report on the flow of reparation labour into the country, by 7 May Britain was receiving approximately 30,000 German prisoners every month.<sup>68</sup> Less than two months later it was confirmed in the House of Commons that of the 515,918 Germans held prisoner by the British around the world, 385,438 were now on the UK mainland.<sup>69</sup> This figure continued to rise until the end of July 1946, by which time a total of 74,000 men had been transferred by BAOR, mostly from the Belgian camps, in addition to 127,000 of the 175,000 prisoners held in the USA as well as 34,000 of those who had been removed to Canada between 1940 and 1944.<sup>70</sup>

Operation Fox, however, involved a number of compromises on Britain's part as well as the logistical difficulties of organising and transporting men on such a massive scale. One concern was that, while the ex-'American' prisoners were a much welcomed and substantial addition to the prisoner workforce, their political outlook did not, on the whole, meet with the criteria that had been set by British officials regarding the categories of prisoners deemed 'acceptable' for work in the UK. No

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<sup>66</sup> The United States, who held 140,000 POWs on behalf of the UK, took the decision that all POWs should leave the country by spring 1946.

<sup>67</sup> TNA: PRO FO1032/858, telegram from CCGA in London to CCG, 23 March 1946. The name was presumably chosen on the basis that the authorities kept the prisoners in ignorance of where they were going and why.

<sup>68</sup> TNA: PRO FO1051/494.

<sup>69</sup> Hansard HOC, 16 July 1946, col.185.

<sup>70</sup> Hansard HOC, 30 July 1946, col.772; Matthew Barry Sullivan, *Thresholds of Peace*, 170-172.

political screening and selection process had been conducted prior to their departure from Canada and the USA, which meant that Nazi or 'black' POWs as well as non-Nazi prisoners were all found amongst the reparations labourers received by the British authorities. According to Henry Faulk, who was in charge of the programme of 're-educating' German POWs in the UK after the war, the prisoners from Canada proved to be particularly steeped in the Nazi outlook.<sup>71</sup> Officers involved in the political screening of these men in the British camps attributed this to a number of factors. Firstly the relatively young age of the prisoners, who were mostly in their twenties and thirties by 1946, meant that they belonged to the generation that had grown up under National Socialism, a political system that infiltrated almost every aspect of their lives: they were therefore more likely to be imbued with the Nazi philosophy. Secondly, the timing of their capture was also believed to have contributed to their mental outlook: the vast majority of them had fought with the Afrika Korps and had been taken prisoners between late 1940 and the spring of 1941 when Germany's chances of winning still seemed good. As a result, according to official reports, throughout their years in captivity they had lived in a political vacuum, not appreciating the vast political, material and psychological changes that had taken place in Germany and Europe during that time. The Canadian camps were therefore reported to have been 'more intensively Nazi than Germany itself', and it was not until the war had ended that the faith that these prisoners had in Hitler and their commitment to National Socialism even began to diminish.<sup>72</sup>

The POWs who were transferred from the USA to Britain should not have presented the same problems. Most of these men had been taken prisoner after the D-Day invasion of June 1944 and had witnessed first-hand the catastrophic collapse of

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<sup>71</sup> Henry Faulk, *Group Captives: The Re-education of German Prisoners of War in Britain 1945-1948* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1977), 176-177.

<sup>72</sup> Report of the Prisoner of War Department (POWD), December 1946, cited in *ibid.*, 178.

the Third Reich. However, they were not aware that the USA had only been looking after them temporarily until Britain had the material resources to deal with them. Not surprisingly then, when the shipments of POWs began to leave American shores, the prisoners as well as the American public believed that they were going home to Germany and not to work for the British. The transition for these prisoners, as for the 'Canadians', was therefore far from harmonious. Many were frustrated by what seemed to them to be a deliberate deception by the American and British authorities and they were irritated further by the procedures they faced on arrival in the UK. Items that they had purchased in the American camp canteens were immediately confiscated, the men were allocated to fresh units, documented, medically inspected, interrogated and issued with new prisoner numbers – a process which had the psychological effect of not only making them feel as though they were 'being made prisoners a second time', but also, according to the German POWs questioned by officials later, that they had been 'sold to Britain like slaves'.<sup>73</sup> Added to all this was the fact that prisoners had to cope not only with the break-up of social groupings and friendships that had formed in the United States, but also with the prospect of less food and fewer material goods generally than they had been used to in the USA. By July 1946 the Trade Union Centre for German Workers in Britain reported that the arrival of prisoners from the American continent had resulted in a generally negative, and even disastrous effect on morale within many of the British POW camps.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, Henry Faulk, in his role as head of prisoner-of-war re-education, reported friction between inmates, incidents of sabotage and the necessity to transfer some fanatical Nazis so as to prevent them from influencing others in the camps. He also

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 171; Henry Faulk, *Group Captives*, 177.

<sup>74</sup> MSS.292/881.423/8 T2147, German POWs in British Hands: Some Facts and Suggestions, 1 July 1946.

noted that the resentment felt by these prisoners towards the British continued throughout their period of captivity and did much to hinder the re-education process.

At the same time that Britain was preparing to receive prisoners from North America, the CCG was also putting plans into place for the gathering and shipment of POWs from Germany. By April, the POW discharge centre at Münsterlager had been identified as offering a pool of potentially 'suitable' prisoners for reparations work in Britain and details were drawn up to ensure maximum efficiency.<sup>75</sup> Firstly, no prisoners from the British and American Zones of Occupation – whether POWs, SEPs or DEFs - were to be discharged as a matter of course by the centre; they were instead to be sorted with a view to their suitability for reparations labour. Exemptions included the sick or those found to be medically unsuitable, officers, protected medical personnel, men whose repatriation and discharge had been specifically requested by the Control Commission, youths under nineteen and men over fifty. These were to be discharged 'immediately' and in the usual way, while all others would be held in the centre until it became full to its capacity of 30,000 men, after which time early arrivals would be discharged on a head for head basis against new intakes 'so as to ensure that a full holding was always available'.<sup>76</sup> In support of this plan the War Office simultaneously authorised an increase in the rations issued to SEPs in Germany, in other words those held prisoner without having POW status, to a maximum scale of 2,000 calories per day. This was to be implemented 'on the purely utilitarian ground' that it was necessary to feed them reasonably well so that they would be fit to perform satisfactory labour when taken to the UK, while the right to withhold the supplementary rations from other disarmed soldiers who were not

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<sup>75</sup> TNA: PRO FO1051/494, BAOR Memorandum on Reparations Labour, 8 April 1946.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

considered eligible for such work was maintained.<sup>77</sup> The irony in this decision, however, was that although the new ration scales were ultimately intended to benefit Britain and her reconstruction demands, they were nevertheless to be recorded and charged as aid to the Civil German Economy.<sup>78</sup> In all, 14,500 Surrendered Enemy Personnel were transformed by the British authorities into regular POWs and shipped across the Channel to Britain during the summer of 1946.<sup>79</sup> They too were resentful, because, having worked for the Allies in Germany, Austria and Italy for almost a year after the capitulation, they had been collected together and, according to prisoner accounts, told that they were going home, only to find later that they were actually being sent to work in Britain 'for not more than a hundred days'.<sup>80</sup>

By the end of July 1946 the government had succeeded in transferring a total of 388,000 German prisoners to Britain. However, the process had been a difficult and protracted one for all concerned. The War Office had had to modify earlier policy decisions and accept all available men, including prisoners with political attitudes that had previously been considered 'unsuitable'. It had had to rely on the co-operation of officials in the British Zone of Occupation who were themselves overstretched and having to cope with holding thousands of prisoners in extremely harsh material circumstances while they searched for a way to fulfil the British government's demands for reparations workers. To the majority of prisoners, of course, their removal to Britain for an indefinite period of labour after the war seemed unjust, to say the least. The circumstances which many experienced before their transfer – starvation conditions in Belgium, the relative material wealth of the American POW camps, as well as expectations of imminent release and repatriation – not only

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 'Ration Scales – Disarmed Personnel', 14 June 1946.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Henry Faulk, *Group Captives*, 180.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 181, POWD Report, October 1946.



exacerbated their sense of injustice but also, after their arrival in the UK, contributed to an atmosphere of depression within the British camps and feelings of distrust among the inmates regarding the intentions of the British authorities towards them.

However, despite the many problems involved in acquiring a prisoner workforce, problems that had often seemed insurmountable, the British government never hesitated in pursuing its plans to bring as many German prisoners as possible to Britain to assist in the country's post-war recovery; on the contrary it showed throughout a single-minded determination to defy all the odds stacked against the success of the enterprise and, indeed, demonstrated that there were few obstacles that could not be overcome and no rule, whether of the national or international sort, that could not simply be re-written or adapted to meet the present demand. Defending Britain's labour reparations policy in the House of Commons on 29 July 1946, the Minister of State, Philip Noel-Baker, said:

I think it is certain that since the Geneva Convention was made, there has never been any war in which such enormous numbers of people were taken by one belligerent state virtually as slaves to work on its territory for many years while the war continued. Therefore, it is not unreasonable that when the war is over some prisoners of war may be held for a certain time longer than the Convention might have contemplated originally, as some form of reparation. Certainly there has never been a war in which there has been such a great physical destruction on the territories of other countries, for which reparation was required.<sup>81</sup>

The implication of this argument was, therefore, that two wrongs actually do make a right – that treating Germans as they had treated others was somehow justifiable, regardless of the rules laid down by Geneva. As time progressed and war psychosis faded, however, the reasoning behind this argument became less compelling. With the desire for vengeance diminishing among the British public generally during the course of 1946, it was inevitable that questions would be raised concerning the

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<sup>81</sup> Hansard HOC, 29 July 1946, col. 547.

supposed economic benefits of employing German POWs as well as the moral aspects surrounding their enforced retention in Britain for this purpose.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The British Labour Movement and the Employment of German POWs from July 1945

On 25 July 1945 the newly elected Labour government took office. Under the leadership of Clement Attlee it willingly and almost without question proceeded to bring to fruition the War-Cabinet's plans involving the impressment and employment of German prisoners of war in Britain. It was, however, a policy that appeared to stand in direct contradiction to the main tenets of Socialism, which formed the keystone of Labour's philosophy and which had always been called upon by its leaders when rallying support for the Party. When, for example, Attlee informed delegates at his Party's annual conference in May 1940 that he and his colleagues were entering the coalition government, this was, he emphasised, in order to represent the interests of the international Labour movement. He ended his speech with the following words, which, in light of the present discussion, seem somewhat ironic:

Friends, we are standing here today to take a decision not only on behalf of our own movement but on behalf of Labour all over the world. We have to stand today for the souls in prison in Czechoslovakia, in Poland, yes, and in Germany...I have no doubt at all as to what the feelings of our people are...Life without liberty is not worth living. Let us go forward and win that liberty forever on the sure foundation of social justice.<sup>1</sup>

Five years later it appeared to many that liberty had, indeed, been won 'forever': those enslaved by the Nazi regime in the factories and concentration camps all over Europe had been set free by the victorious Allies. 'Democratic' became the accepted and often-repeated term used to describe everything in the post-war world, from new

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<sup>1</sup> Clement Attlee, cited in Kenneth Harris, *Attlee* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1982), 178.

political organisations, including political parties, national governments and those with an international political dimension, such as the United Nations, to all aspects of economic planning, and there was a general optimism that, with the downfall of the Third Reich, the ‘foundations of social justice’, which Attlee had talked of in 1940, could at last be firmly laid.

In preparation for the 1945 general election the Labour Party composed a manifesto intended to convey to the public its distinctive socialist message. In no uncertain terms *Let Us Face The Future* promised the British electorate that the Party’s ultimate purpose was the establishment of the Socialist Commonwealth of Great Britain – ‘free, democratic, public spirited, its material resources organised in the service of the British people’.<sup>2</sup> In addition, it stated that while the Party stood for freedom of worship and of speech, as well as the restoration of civil liberties, there were certain so-called freedoms that Labour was not prepared to tolerate, including ‘freedom to exploit other people, freedom to pay poor wages’, and ‘freedom to deprive the people of the means of living full, happy and healthy lives’.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, *Let Us Face The Future* urged electors to vote ‘straight left’ as the only guarantee of fair treatment in economic matters and in order to maintain the greater social equality that had been achieved during the war.<sup>4</sup>

At the earliest opportunity the British public readily endorsed Labour’s ideological agenda, which held out the promise of a better and fairer society. The 1945 election resulted in a ‘landslide’ victory for the Party, which gained 393 parliamentary seats compared to the mere 210 which went to the Conservatives.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Let Us Face The Future*, cited in Ina Zweininger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls and Consumption 1939-1955* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 210.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Although Labour obtained almost twice as many seats as the Conservatives, the nature of Britain’s electoral system exaggerated the degree of Labour’s success. The actual gap between the two parties in

Despite this success, however, the catastrophic effects of the Second World War on the country meant that implementing the measures required to bring about Labour's promise was never going to be an easy task. The new administration had to secure economic recovery and social reconstruction, find a means of paying off Britain's massive war debt, and come to terms with her changing position within the new global power structure. A major problem facing the new government, therefore, was how to achieve all of this while maintaining steady progress on the road to democratic socialism.

Inevitably, the task of providing some form of 'social justice' would have faced whichever party had won the 1945 election, whether on the 'right' or 'left' of the political spectrum. It is not surprising, therefore, that many of the currents flowing in the direction of a new post-war system of social justice, including plans for a welfare state system, emanated from a war-time consensus of Liberal, Conservative and Labour opinion, as well as from ideas from non-party sources. Even Labour's foreign policy in 1945 was, according to the new Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, 'in keeping with that marked out by the Coalition Government'.<sup>6</sup> This continuation of ideas between Churchill's war-time coalition and the 1945-51 Labour administration later fuelled a complex debate among historians and political commentators who sought to determine whether or not Attlee's was, indeed, a socialist government.<sup>7</sup> Almost all aspects of Labour's policy-making have been examined in this context, from the organisation of the economy, including matters of employment and public ownership,

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the share of the vote was only just over eight per cent (Labour 48%, Conservative 39.6%), with only just over a third of those eligible to vote casting their votes in favour of Labour.

<sup>6</sup> Ernest Bevin, cited in Kenneth Harris, *Attlee*, 269.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Kenneth O. Morgan, *Labour in Power, 1945-1951* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985); H. Pelling, *The Labour Governments 1945-1951* (London: Macmillan, 1984).

to issues concerning education, gender and social welfare.<sup>8</sup> However, despite the significance which it would assume in the early post-war years, the policy of extracting reparations in the form of labour from Germany has, as yet, been left out of the discussion. This chapter, therefore, sets out to establish whether the decision to continue pursuing such a policy after July 1945 was evidence of a 'consensus' mentality within the British government, or whether it actually reflected views held independently by the Labour Party, views that would presumably have conflicted with the fundamental ideas about liberty and social justice, which had been so explicitly laid out in the Party's manifesto. In order to assess the rationale behind this policy choice, consideration will also be given both to the political, practical and moral aspects involved in the employment of German POWs from mid-1945, and to the economic advantages or disadvantages that arose from it.

As discussed in Chapter Three, labour reparations had been raised as a subject of discussion between the three major Allies at the Yalta Conference in February 1945. This showed that both before and after the Conference the British government gave the matter most attention among reparations topics and expressed the wish to include labour power as a form of payment in the reparations account. In his role as Deputy Prime Minister during the war, Clement Attlee had been a central figure in the discussions on reparations and post-war security and, as such, had been able to exert considerable influence over policy-making. He had been appointed chairman of all three Cabinet sub-Committees established to co-ordinate the many ideas in circulation regarding post-war Germany, the most important being the Armistice Terms and Civil Administration Committee, which he chaired from August 1943.<sup>9</sup> The minutes of the

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<sup>8</sup> See Martin Francis, *Ideas and Policies Under Labour, 1945-1951: Building a New Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> In April 1944 this Committee was superseded by the Armistice and Post-War Committee (APW), still with Attlee in the chair.

Committee show that Attlee was a strong chairman who expressed his views on Germany and the German people uncompromisingly. According to Kenneth Harris, no other member of the coalition government was as determined as Attlee to see that Germany could never make war again, and that Germans took responsibility, *en masse*, for the policies of their leaders.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, at the beginning of 1943, despite opposition from both sides of the House, he had argued in favour of the Allied governments' demand for Germany's unconditional surrender and, on the question of what would become of members of the German armed forces as a result of this policy, Attlee expressed his opposition to giving them prisoner-of-war status. This, he asserted, would allow them to claim the protection of the Geneva Convention, thus putting enormous pressure on scarce food supplies.<sup>11</sup> According to Attlee, since 'they had brought the war on themselves', the prisoners should have no rights to anything but minimum humanitarian treatment.<sup>12</sup>

While from May 1940 Attlee was pressing these issues of post-war policy at governmental level, exerting considerable influence, the Labour Party was also concerning itself with the development and publicising of its own peace aims. In 1941 a 'Central Committee on Reconstruction' was established under the chairmanship of Emanuel Shinwell, a left-wing member of the Party, with the specific aim of making recommendations on problems likely to arise in the immediate post-war period. Before the committee was dissolved in 1943, it presented a report, *The Old World and the New Society*, which was submitted in a draft statement to the National Executive

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<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Harris, *Attlee*, 210.

<sup>11</sup> The Geneva Convention stipulated that the scale of food rations granted prisoners of war should equal that of the home forces of the custodian power.

<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Harris, *Attlee*, 211.

in May 1943.<sup>13</sup> However, the chairman of the Party's policy sub-committee, Hugh Dalton, who was also President of the Board of Trade in the coalition government from 1943 on, expressed the view that what was called for was not only a study of likely international post-war scenarios, but also a set of precise solutions to specific problems. Indeed, it was Dalton who undertook the task of composing Labour's own international post-war strategy which, as he saw it, would need to ensure 'maximum security (a) against war; (b) against defeat; if, despite all our efforts, war should come again; (c) against unemployment, poverty and all other forms of economic distress; (d) against Fascism and all forms of political slavery'.<sup>14</sup>

The first draft of *The International Post-War Settlement* was completed by November 1943. The harsh demands it considered should be made on Germany after the war flowed naturally from Dalton's belief in German responsibility for the war and show that he was no more forgiving in his attitude than Attlee. While he acknowledged the existence of 'good' Germans, they were, as he saw it, 'singularly ineffective in restraining the bad Germans' - particularly members of the Gestapo, the S.S. and the S.A., as well as large numbers of the regular Armed Forces.<sup>15</sup> Germany, therefore, should be disarmed and her political organisation placed in the hands of the 'three outstanding Great Powers' who, as 'the solid nucleus of a World Organisation', would determine her future.<sup>16</sup> On the issue of reparations, Dalton demanded that Germany should recompense the victorious nations in kind, through the payment of occupation costs and, remarkably, by providing labour power over a five to six year

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<sup>13</sup> John T. Grantham, 'Hugh Dalton and the International Post-War Settlement: Labour Party Foreign Policy Formation, 1943-1944', in *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol.14, No.1, January 1979, 713-729.

<sup>14</sup> Hugh Dalton, *The Fateful Years: Memoirs 1931-1945* (London: Frederick Muller Ltd, 1957), 424. These points were included in *The International Post-War Settlement: Report by the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party to be presented to the Annual Conference to be held in London from May 29<sup>th</sup> to June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1944*. Hereafter referred to as IPWS.

<sup>15</sup> IPWS, 'The Question of German Responsibility'.

<sup>16</sup> IPWS, 'Nucleus of a World Organisation'.



period in order to redress the 'cruel robberies' committed by the Germans during the war.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, moreover, he clearly stated his belief that Germany, through its forced labour policy, had set a valuable precedent:

The Germans have clearly demonstrated by their heavy exactions and by their systematic exploitation of the occupied territories that very large contributions, in labour and in goods, as well as in money, can be collected from one country for the benefit of another.<sup>18</sup>

Dalton's thinking betrays a considerable admixture of hypocrisy. After all, the Allies were fighting an ethical war and had throughout the conflict emphasised their moral superiority over Germany and had publicly condemned her for this action. Moreover, such a rationale hardly corresponded with Labour's intention to put an end to an array of intolerable 'freedoms', namely 'freedom to exploit other people, freedom to pay poor wages...[and] freedom to deprive the people of the means of living full, happy, healthy lives', which would lie at the heart of Labour's socialist promise in 1945.<sup>19</sup> However, as Dalton, and no doubt many others, saw it, since Germany had 'lived by the sword' she would now have to suffer the consequences and there was no question that those handing out the punishment were morally and ethically 'right' to do so.

Dalton's draft was eventually approved by the Labour Party's International Committee on 18 April 1944. However, along the way it was subjected to harsh criticism by some of the Party's prominent members, particularly Harold Laski and Philip Noel-Baker, whom Dalton called the 'silly pro-German faction'.<sup>20</sup> These critics objected to the attribution of responsibility for the war to 'Germans' rather than

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<sup>17</sup> IPWS, 'Reparations and Restitution'.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> *Let Us Face The Future*, cited in Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain*, 210.

<sup>20</sup> Hugh Dalton, *The Fateful Years*, 423. Harold Laski was a left-wing political theorist and leading British intellectual. He was Chairman of the British Labour Party 1945-6 and was responsible for shaping Labour's socialist manifesto in 1945. Philip Noel-Baker had served on the League of Nations secretariat (1919-22), had been Professor of International Relations at the University of London (1924-9) and a Labour MP from 1936. In 1942 he was appointed to the position of Joint Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of War Transport and became Minister of State at the Foreign Office after Labour's electoral success in 1945. Both Laski and Noel-Baker were on the national executive of the Labour Party, but lacked Dalton's seniority.

'Nazis', to the ordering of international affairs by America, Russia and Britain, which, they felt, smacked of 'power politics' and ran counter to the whole internationalist tradition of British Labour, and to the excessive reparations demands, particularly the proposed use of labour as a form of payment, which Noel-Baker strongly condemned. Clearly then, there was significant disagreement within the Labour Party over the strategy to be adopted towards a post-war Germany. Despite this, however, no fundamental changes were made to the document, as Dalton noted in his memoirs:

On the whole, it was still the sort of document I wanted. I had not given away much of its original substance, though I had blunted some sharp phrases. Laski and Noel-Baker, who had been among the critics, had both contributed new sections. But these I regarded as harmless additions, not harmful subtractions or substitutions.<sup>21</sup>

In his study of *The International Post War Settlement*, John Grantham attributes Dalton's success firstly to the irregular or late attendance of the 'pro-German faction', in particular Laski and Noel-Baker, at the five sub-committee meetings during which separate votes were taken on each point raised, and, secondly, to the regular attendance of Dalton and his supporters, whose bloc vote proved decisive.<sup>22</sup> As Grantham remarks, 'constant attendance and prior preparation were the hallmarks of [Dalton's] performance. And it was just the absence of these characteristics which undermined the campaign of his opponents.'<sup>23</sup>

It is, of course, difficult to determine whether Dalton's proposed post-war settlement was simply a reflection of his own particular viewpoint or whether, as a member of the War Cabinet, he was dutifully reproducing policies on post-war Germany that had already been researched and formulated by the Foreign Office. However, although Dalton and other Labour ministers would have found it difficult to maintain their positions in the Cabinet while simultaneously issuing a document

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> John Grantham, 'Hugh Dalton and the International Post-War Settlement', 726.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

expressing opposing views on behalf of the Labour Party, it seems more likely that Dalton's ideas emanated from his own distrust and fear of Germany and coincided with those of the government rather than being determined by it. Furthermore, the fact that he enjoyed the support of a sizeable element of the party suggests that *The International Post-War Settlement* resulted from an understanding of the 'German Problem' and how it should be addressed that was not particular to one man any more than it was to one party. This is most clearly illustrated by the attitude of trade union leaders, who shared Dalton's 'hard line' position and were as determined as he was to destroy all possibility of Germany again waging war.<sup>24</sup> It was an attitude that also transcended party lines and ideology: Germany, it seems, was viewed as a unique case evoking a particular response and requiring the adoption of a special set of rules. But, of course, there could not be complete agreement on such an emotive issue. Following its publication in April 1944, Labour's proposed post-war settlement was subjected to criticism by the broader Labour movement. The left-wing press condemned it as evidence of the 'political bankruptcy' of the Party since joining the Tories in the Coalition government and accused its authors of Vansittartism in their approach to dealing with the problems of post-war Germany.<sup>25</sup> The proposals also provoked adverse responses from party activists. In July 1944 the Parliamentary Peace Aims Group, comprised of Labour MPs under the chairmanship of Rhys J. Davies, published its own attack on the entire ethos behind Dalton's paper which, it claimed, revealed a 'lack of solidarity, of collective understanding, of united will, and indeed of Socialist purpose'.<sup>26</sup> Entitled *Labour and the Post-War Settlement*, the stated aim of this critique was to restore the Labour Party's traditional policy of

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> *The Observer*, 30 April 1944.

<sup>26</sup> *Labour and the Post-War Settlement*, (Published by the Parliamentary Peace Aims Group, July 1944), 4.

internationalism and to encourage the abandonment of the system of power-politics currently being advocated by the American, Russian and British governments. On the subject of Germany, it argued that lessons should be learned from the mistakes of the last post-war settlement, particularly with regard to reparations, which had imposed an enormous strain on all concerned. Under the heading 'Reparations and Restitution', the Peace Aims Group focused its attack specifically on Dalton's call for the use of German manpower:

Memories are short but not so short as to forget the effect of reparations after the last war. We do not want reparations in kind, nor do we want huge piles of debt, either amongst enemy or friendly countries. Nor do we seriously wish to have armies of German slaves here doing our men out of jobs, while at the same time the recovery of Germany as part of the European economy is postponed to our own disadvantage – to the disadvantage of our workers. Obviously the return of loot must take place, but we do not want German workers rebuilding Russia or London, any more than we want to send British workers to rebuild Berlin! ***Reparations from German workers means unemployment of British workers.***<sup>27</sup>

The authors of *Labour and the Post-War Settlement* had voiced their objections in terms of the potentially negative economic consequences of the policy while at the same time showing little concern, given the humane vision of Socialism, for its ethical implications other than to use the rather emotive word 'slaves' to describe the German workers whom it was proposed to employ in Britain. However, following Labour's electoral success in the late summer of 1945, Richard Stokes, Secretary of the Parliamentary Peace Aims Group and described as a 'genial and rich industrialist who was much the keeper of the conscience of the Labour Party', became acerbic in his frequent criticism of the government's policy towards German prisoners of war.<sup>28</sup> In Parliament it was he, and interestingly not the Conservatives, who repeatedly questioned the legal, political and moral basis for a policy, which, as

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 13, the italics appear in the original.

<sup>28</sup> Matthew Barry Sullivan, *Thresholds of Peace: Four Hundred Thousand German Prisoners and the People of Great Britain 1944-1948* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1979), 91.

Stokes saw it, effectively allowed Britain to retain German POWs as 'slave labour'. Indeed, he questioned the authority on which this action was based and demanded to know whether, despite Churchill's earlier assurances that the German people would not be 'enslaved or destroyed' under the terms of unconditional surrender, a 'secret' agreement on the issue of labour reparations had been reached between the Big Three during or after the Yalta negotiations.<sup>29</sup> Stokes also sought to expose what he saw as the government's lack of commitment to the Geneva Convention on almost every point relating to the treatment and general maintenance of the prisoners, particularly with regard to their repatriation to Germany. His speeches on the subject were usually long and always emotionally charged, and he constantly sought to remind his fellow party members where their priorities should lie, going so far as to tell them that 'no self-respecting member of the Labour Party could countenance the continued use of prisoners of war for slave purposes after the termination of hostilities'.<sup>30</sup>

Noel-Baker, who, during 1944, had urged Dalton to curtail his demands for reparations in *The International Post-War Settlement*, was in the position two years later, as Secretary of State, of having to defend Britain's use of German prisoner labour on behalf of the government. He usually did so by driving home the point that, while Britain was no longer legally bound by the terms of the Geneva Convention, she was nevertheless treating her prisoners humanely and at least in accordance with the 'spirit of Geneva'.

Ministers were, however, less forthcoming on a rather more ticklish point, which no doubt was a source of embarrassment to the government, namely the juxtaposition of Britain's actions *vis-à-vis* her German prisoners of war and the criminal cases being brought by the Allied powers against Hitler's chief satraps. Between November

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<sup>29</sup> Hansard HOC, 27 March 1946, col.536.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

1945 and October 1946 the major Nazi war criminals were arraigned before the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg. The jurisdiction and general principles upon which their trials and punishment were based, the Nuremberg Charter, had been drawn up by the major Allied powers in the name of the United Nations. Crimes which the accused were alleged to have committed would fall under the headings of 'War Crimes', 'Crimes Against Humanity' and 'Crimes Against Peace', among the most serious of which was involvement in carrying out the policy of deportation and slave labour which the Third Reich had mercilessly brought to bear on European civilians as well as prisoners of war. The scope of responsibility for this particular crime was explored in nine of the trials at Nuremberg. Those accused under this heading, among them Fritz Sauckel, who was head of the Third Reich's forced labour programme between 1942 and 1945, and Albert Speer, who, as head of Germany's armaments and war production programme during the same period, had made requests for slave labourers, were shown to have been responsible for such cruelty towards these workers during the collection and transportation process as well as in the treatment meted out to them afterwards, that the Nuremberg judgement outlawed the practice of deportation and forced labour in any form in order to prevent similar tragedies occurring in the future.

At the time of the trials, and repeatedly since, the Nuremberg Charter has been criticised as yet another manifestation of post-war global power-politics. By the time it was issued, the Allied nations had already accorded themselves sovereign rights over post-war Germany and her people under the terms of Unconditional Surrender. Now, the Allied powers, or rather the prosecution at Nuremberg, were drawing up the indictments and conducting the cases against the defendants - the major Nazi war criminals. For Hermann Goering the trial was, therefore, nothing more than 'a cut-

and-dried political affair' and its outcome predictable.<sup>31</sup> However, Rebecca West, who was present in the court-room, was more optimistic and hoped that the Tribunal would be no less than a positive milestone in the administering of international justice: 'It has to prove', she noted, 'that victors can so rise above the ordinary limitations of human nature as to be able to try fairly the foes they vanquished, by submitting themselves to the restraints of law.'<sup>32</sup> Of course, the terms of Unconditional Surrender had already removed many 'restraints of law' and had given the Allies enough scope to modify 'legally' the treatment of German POWs, as and when the need arose - a point repeatedly stated by ministers as justification for the labour reparations policy. What officials failed to acknowledge, however, was that, by continuing to draw reparations from Germany in the form of involuntary labour after the war, Britain and other Allied nations were, in effect, not 'submitting themselves to' but, rather, flouting laws they themselves had formulated and applied at the International Military Tribunal during 1946.

To Speer, who received a twenty-year prison sentence at Nuremberg, it seemed implausible that the Allied powers would continue to hold millions of German POWs for 'forced labour' while at the same time condemning himself and others for violations of the Geneva Convention. He was, therefore, hopeful that his own conviction would at least result in the prisoners' speedy repatriation. As was frequently the case, Speer seized on an opportunity to minimise the criminality of his own actions. In April 1947, in his cell in Spandau prison, he wrote:

My juridical guilt is comparatively not so grave, because the victors, especially the Soviet Union, are now doing the very thing I was charged with - they are using prisoners of war for forced labour. Moreover, Allied laws require Germans to

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<sup>31</sup> Anna and John Tusa, *The Nuremberg Trials* (London: Macmillan Press, 1983), 13.

<sup>32</sup> Rebecca West, cited in *ibid.*, 14. Rebecca West (1892-1983) was a highly acclaimed English journalist, novelist and critic whose literary career spanned more than seventy years. During the war West was a talks supervisor at the BBC in London. Her writings on the Nuremberg trials, commissioned by the *New Yorker*, were collected in *A Train of Powder* (1955).

work whether they want to or not. Conditions in the Soviet camps, and in a good many of the Western camps as well, are said to be bad, and in some places simply barbarous. I also hear that German workers are being deported; and although in our case the legal rights of the matter may not have been entirely clear, now after the Nuremberg verdicts, such measures are undoubtedly a violation of international law.<sup>33</sup>

The deportation and employment of German POWs after 1945 was also considered by others to be a legally contentious practice. In Britain, during a House of Commons Debate on prisoners of war which took place in March 1946, Richard Stokes provocatively drew attention to what he regarded as the inconsistency between government policy and international law:

I think that a great deal of the trial going on at Nuremberg is completely bogus, and it becomes even more bogus when you consider some of the things which the Allied Governments are doing at the present. They are doing some of those very things for which we are trying the war criminals at Nuremberg, such as forcible detention and slave labour – because it is nothing else when German nationals are detained as they are here.<sup>34</sup>

Stokes was strongly criticised by other members of his party for what they regarded as his 'extreme' views, while the government refused to accept the implication that Britain's use of German POW labour was even remotely akin to the exploitation of workers by the Nazis: prisoners of war in Britain, it was stated, were better fed, better clothed and better housed than their compatriots in Germany.<sup>35</sup> There was, of course, some truth in this argument, as prisoners of war held in the UK were, on the whole, treated humanely and were not subjected to the cruelties and hardships which had been endemic under the Nazi system of forced labour. And, although there were shortages of food, fuel and domestic goods in Britain after the war, it is also true that materially at least prisoners were better off than civilians in post-war Germany. However, according to Stokes, this did not prove that they were not slaves, only that

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<sup>33</sup> Albert Speer, *Spandau: The Secret Diaries* (London: Collins, 1976). Speer refers to this issue in the entries for 18 March and 1 April, 1947, 45 and 53.

<sup>34</sup> Hansard HOC, 27 March 1946, col. 533.

<sup>35</sup> Hansard HOC, 8 May 1946, cols.1043-4



the British were better 'slave-masters.'<sup>36</sup> The government defended itself against his attacks by reiterating its commitment to the 'spirit of Geneva', even though what was demanded by Stokes and his supporters was adherence not only to the 'spirit of socialism' but also the 'spirit of Nuremberg' so as to put an end to the deportations, which were in full swing by the middle of 1946, and to set in motion the immediate release of those prisoners already being held in the UK. In response to these serious accusations, the government made no attempt to justify in legal terms the labour reparations policy it was pursuing. The fact of the matter, it maintained, was that in 1946, despite any possible moral or legal obligation to return the prisoners, Britain simply could not afford to do so.

Indeed, it became apparent early on in his administration that Attlee and his party would be unable to deliver Labour's promises of social amelioration under the harsh economic conditions prevailing in post-war Britain. The country, according to Hugh Dalton, the new Chancellor, was in 'an almost desperate plight' and a general atmosphere of gloom and disillusion hung over official discussions on the economy, as is apparent from a statement made during a House of Commons debate on the subject in December 1945:

We are sitting here today as the representatives of a victorious people, discussing the economic consequences of victory. If a visitor were to come...from Mars...he might well be pardoned for thinking that he was listening to the representatives of a vanquished people discussing the economic penalties of defeat.<sup>37</sup>

Among the pressing difficulties facing the government were, firstly, that it had to raise the funds necessary to finance imports, meet Britain's obligations abroad, feed her population and pay for essential works programmes; secondly, that somehow it

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<sup>36</sup> Hansard HOC, 27 March 1946, col. 541.

<sup>37</sup> Hugh Dalton, cited in Kenneth Harris, *Attlee*, 271; Hansard HOC, 13 December 1945, cols. 652-3, cited in J.C.R. Dow, *The Management of the British Economy 1945-60* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 18.

would have to fulfil the urgent need for manpower; and thirdly, it would have to implement a scheme for demobilisation of the Armed Forces that satisfied not only Britain's international commitments but also the demands of her population. The problems were in many ways interrelated, the solution of each relying heavily on the successful handling of the others. At best, Britain's speedy recovery depended, therefore, on a precarious balance of economic factors, and, during the early post-war period, the government's ability to achieve such a balance was continually being compromised.

A major and unexpected stumbling-block presented itself soon after Labour's electoral victory in the summer of 1945, with immediate economic consequences for Britain. The Lend-Lease agreement, which had involved the supply and transfer of goods from the United States to Great Britain and the Dominions and Russia to help them in the war effort, ended without discussion or prior warning on 21 August 1945, seven days after the Japanese surrender.<sup>38</sup> This meant that imports of this kind coming to the UK from the US would now have to be paid for. This was particularly worrying news considering that, in comparison with 1938, the value of non-military goods being imported into Britain, mainly from North America, had risen five-fold, whilst British exports had fallen by one third.<sup>39</sup> This yawning gap in the balance of trade resulted in an urgent need to take measures to boost the production of goods for the domestic market, and, to meet the high cost of imports, to increase the volume of Britain's export trade by at least seventy-five per cent of its pre-war level.<sup>40</sup>

However, serious obstacles would have to be overcome in order to achieve these targets. The first of these was the severe shortage of productive labour. In August

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<sup>38</sup> The economic consequences of the cessation of Lend-Lease are discussed in more detail in Chapter Seven, p.225.

<sup>39</sup> Kenneth Harris, *Attlee*, 271; J.C.R. Dow, *The Management of the British Economy*, 14.

<sup>40</sup> Report of the Parliamentary Labour Party, *Labour's First Year: The Facts*, (September 1946), 13.

1945, the total workforce was estimated to be 21,500,000, of whom almost one quarter (5,090,000), were still in the Armed Forces and another 3,887,000 were employed in the munitions industries.<sup>41</sup> Of the remainder, only 417,000 were producing for export industries and a mere 722,000 were working in building and civil engineering.<sup>42</sup> Hence, a drastic reorganisation of the workforce would have to be undertaken in order to facilitate a rapid expansion in industrial production. On 3 September 1945, Attlee announced that the total workforce employed in civilian industries was still five million below the pre-war level.<sup>43</sup> This figure corresponded almost exactly with the number then serving in the Armed Forces, and there is little doubt that in making his announcement, Attlee intended to reassure the public as to the government's commitment to bringing Britain's troops home swiftly. Nevertheless, the fact remained that failure to expand the industrial workforce rapidly would lead to prolonged shortages in essential goods as well as inflation and high taxation to meet the spiralling costs of imports.<sup>44</sup>

The task of demobilisation was, indeed, a major problem for the Labour government. This was because Britain found herself having to deploy large forces to administer its zone in occupied Germany as well as to fulfil its substantial commitments elsewhere in Europe, the Mediterranean, the Middle East and the Far East. Also, Ernest Bevin's Demobilisation Programme, drawn up for the Coalition Government, had stipulated that men between the ages of eighteen and thirty would continue to be called up after the war and that soldiers stationed in Europe and Britain would only be demobilised after those serving in the Far East had returned home.<sup>45</sup> Although this programme was now unacceptable to industrialists and public opinion

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Kenneth Harris, *Attlee*, 270.

<sup>44</sup> Attlee, 3 March 1946, cited in *ibid.*, 321.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 322.

generally, Bevin, as Foreign Secretary in the new Labour Cabinet, persuaded Attlee to honour these pledges in the interests of British security. Despite these constraints, however, Labour was still able to announce a year later that it had succeeded in demobilising 3,689,000 servicemen and women.<sup>46</sup> The Ministry of Labour, under George Isaacs, also introduced a number of measures to supplement the industrial workforce: it encouraged older workers and married women to remain in industry; it lifted many of the restrictions that had been imposed on worker mobility during the war; it brought new enterprises to the economically depressed areas of Great Britain and it introduced a complementary scheme to give financial assistance in cases of industrial resettlement. In addition, the number of places for ex-servicemen and others on Government Vocational Training Schemes was dramatically increased, from 3,600 in August 1945 to 20,000 in July 1946.<sup>47</sup>

During its first year in government the Labour Party had therefore made an impressive effort to restore, and to improve upon, Britain's pre-war industrial performance. As a result of this effort, substantial progress was made and ministers could boast that in July 1946 the value of British exports totalled \$92 million, nearly three times the figure for July 1945 and the highest figure recorded for that month since 1920.<sup>48</sup> Workers, for their part, including returning servicemen, were attracted into industry by the incentives which the government offered as well as by the opportunities available to learn new skills and improve pay and conditions. Moreover, the language of Socialism, which was amplified by the strengthened position of the trade unions under Labour, gave political weight and importance to the role of the industrial worker in British society, while offering workers themselves a sense of self-respect that had been sapped by unemployment before the war. However, while the

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<sup>46</sup> *Labour's First Year: The Facts*, 2.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

industrial workforce continued to expand, other vital sectors of the British economy, particularly agriculture, remained grossly undermanned.

Throughout the war, the constant demand for domestically produced agricultural products had been addressed by a series of mainly temporary measures designed to encourage greater mechanisation and to maximise the number of agricultural workers. These measures improved the situation but did not solve the problem. They included an increase in the numbers of tractors and other farm machinery; the deferment of retirement for those working in agriculture; the recruitment of voluntary, part-time labourers; the formation and deployment of the Women's Land Army; and, of course, the employment of Italian and German prisoners of war. However, with the end of the war, the discontinuation of the supplementary sources of labour seemed inevitable and farmers were naturally apprehensive about the future, not only in terms of the threat to their own incomes but also regarding the pressure that was likely to be placed on them by the Ministry of Agriculture to increase vital food production for the 'nation's larder'. During the course of 1946 the government, in an attempt to avoid a crisis and, no doubt, to avert public outrage, responded by introducing a new set of 'special measures' to help alleviate the shortages in agricultural labour.

In February 1946, the government's plan to call up 8,000 agricultural workers for National Service was suspended indefinitely and a White Paper was subsequently drawn up providing for the deferment from conscription of all agricultural workers on the grounds that their industry needed them. In addition, by August 1946 68,000 out of 85,000 agricultural workers serving in the Armed Forces had returned to the UK, following the offer of release to all agricultural workers with more than a year's service. During the late summer the government also embarked on a recruitment

campaign for the Women's Land Army.<sup>49</sup> The Labour government was able to boast in its first annual report that it had succeeded in keeping the strength of the WLA at nearly 35,000, although it failed to record that the release scheme concurrently in operation had resulted in 42,000 girls actually leaving the Land Army between August and September 1946.<sup>50</sup> In terms of pay and conditions, the government offered other inducements to lure new workers into agriculture and to try and prevent those already working on the land from leaving. The length of the working week was reduced, overtime rates were increased, as was the minimum wage, and agricultural resettlement and vocational training were made available to returning ex-servicemen.<sup>51</sup>

Yet, in spite of these efforts to increase Britain's agricultural workforce, a shortfall remained. A continuation of Bevin's war-time policy involving the direction of manpower into certain vital industries or, alternatively, the adoption of a wages policy to ensure a more rational allocation of manpower resources might have gone some way to help resolve the problem. However, neither of these strategies was consonant with Labour's ideas of socialist planning or of a democratic economy in which a free market in wages and in labour allocation remained sacrosanct, and both, as a consequence, would have been bound to arouse the hostility of the trade unions.<sup>52</sup> How, then, could the labour problem be solved? The solution appeared obvious to many: Britain had to continue to employ German prisoners of war on a large scale, especially in agriculture, which in turn would enable the government to avoid imposing controls on British workers.

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<sup>49</sup> Hansard HOC, 14 October 1946, col. 108.

<sup>50</sup> *Labour's First Year: The Facts*, 18; Hansard HOC, 14 October 1946, col. 108.

<sup>51</sup> *Labour's First Year: The Facts*, 18.

<sup>52</sup> Martin Francis, *Ideas and Policy Under Labour 1945-1951: Building a New Britain*, 43.

However, while the employment of German POWs might have solved Labour's ethical dilemma on the domestic front, it also involved an obvious contradiction, and to some in the Party it appeared as though the freedom of the British worker was partly to be gained at the expense of the forced labour of POWs. In a House of Commons debate in October 1946, opinions on the issue were once again aired:

Both from the economic and humanitarian points of view, I feel that as soon as we get away from forced labour and get back to free labour the better, and the question of turning these people from convict labourers into free labourers should have a high priority in the consideration of the Government.<sup>53</sup>

The government was nevertheless determined to hold on to its POW labourers for as long as it needed to do so and, during the latter half of 1946, despite criticism from within its own ranks, there appeared to be no likelihood of an imminent change in policy. Indeed, the Ministry of Labour was anxious to point out that, if prisoners were not made available to meet the bulk of that department's demands, urgent reconstruction work would be delayed and agricultural production seriously affected. Moreover, it argued that without POWs to work on the clearance of stores from factory space there would be a prolonged delay in employment being made available to British skilled workers.<sup>54</sup> Consequently, by the end of July that year there were 388,000 German POWs in the UK, of whom 212,000 were engaged in agricultural work, a figure which was estimated at that time as constituting approximately one quarter of Britain's entire agricultural workforce.<sup>55</sup>

Naturally, with such extensive use of prisoner labour in agriculture, it was this sector that experienced many of the problems, as well as advantages, that were bound to be associated with it, and these were recognised not only by officials, but also by

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<sup>53</sup> Hansard HOC, 25 October 1946, col.237, comment by R.T Paget, Labour MP for Northampton.

<sup>54</sup> MSS.292/881 423/7 TS19, Ministry of Labour and National Service Joint Consultative Committee, 'Employment of Prisoners of War in 1946'.

<sup>55</sup> Hansard HOC, 30 July 1946, col. 772, and 2 August 1946, col. 283; M.B. Sullivan, *Thresholds of Peace*, 185.

the farmers employing the prisoners, British farm workers, the wider general public and, of course, the prisoners themselves. However, while the effects of POW labour in agriculture will be the major concern here, it must also be remembered that prisoners of war were engaged in a variety of other occupations where labour was also in short supply. For instance, in 1945 Britain faced an enormous housing crisis. During the war as many as four million houses, estimated at one third of the total, had been destroyed or damaged by enemy action.<sup>56</sup> Not surprisingly, under such circumstances, the government sanctioned the employment of 22,000 German POWs in towns and cities clearing bomb damage, in brick and cement making, in the preparation of housing developments as well as on vital road repair. Others worked in timber production and, in the winter, on snow clearance.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, as well as outside work, many prisoners were engaged in work inside the camps. At Featherstone Park camp, Northumberland, for example, prisoners took over the entire running of seven kitchens in which, according to one source, officer-bakers produced the bread for all of the nearby camps.<sup>58</sup> The 'in-workers', as they were called, were also employed as carpenters, builders, and gardeners and, in some camps a veritable light industry was carried on, involving the production of slippers, brushes, trinkets and toys. Indeed, so widespread was this practice that there were many complaints from local toyshops and manufacturers objecting to the distribution of POW-made toys and other goods to local people for fear that it would cause a loss of trade.<sup>59</sup>

As German prisoners rapidly became a visible presence in Britain's economic landscape, officials quickly realised that if the British public were to accept the new

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<sup>56</sup> David Childs, *Britain Since 1945: A Political History* (London: Routledge, 1979), 33.

<sup>57</sup> Henry Faulk, *Group Captives: The Re-education of German Prisoners of War in Britain 1945-1948* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1977), 42.

<sup>58</sup> M.B. Sullivan, *Thresholds of Peace*, 202. Sullivan states that 2,465,588 loaves in total were baked there.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.



status quo, and for a prolonged period, then old policies would have to be reversed. From 1940 on, government propaganda had after all gone to some lengths in order to maintain that German POWs were 'hostile' and a threat to Britain's internal security and, as such, should be transported across the Atlantic to Canada: keeping them in the United Kingdom was simply not a 'risk worth taking'.<sup>60</sup> Towards the end of the war, however, when the necessity of retaining and increasing Britain's prisoner workforce was realised, it became essential to adopt a change of approach with regard to the way in which the POWs were portrayed: insisting that they were dangerous would have been counter-productive since it risked provoking public anxiety. Moreover, given the severe shortages of manpower, the government was unable to provide what would previously have been considered an adequate number of suitable guards to supervise 'dangerous' German POW workers. Indeed, many of the guards were older men from the Pioneer Corps, most of whom, for one reason or another, were deemed unfit for active service.

It was, therefore, fortunate for the government that German POW workers did not prove to be the security risk that had earlier been feared, and it was soon recognised that the necessity for constant supervision, most of which, in agriculture, had to be furnished by the farmer employing the prisoners, actually only served to hamper productivity. Reports confirm that, on the whole, German prisoners conducted themselves well, gave no cause for complaint and as a result were considered capable of working independently: for instance, the War Agricultural Executive Committee for Northumberland informed the Ministry of Agriculture in February 1945:

Their work has been very good and the farmers are pleased with them...there has been one complaint of indifferent work by two men of a party of four but I feel sure this was due to an unsuitable man being in charge, as the trouble included back-chat and this farmer discontinued because he

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<sup>60</sup> TNA: PRO FO916/170, 12 February 1941, memorandum by Sir G. Warner of the War Office.

could not spare a man to be with them all the time. This condition does prevent the fullest use being made of them, as it would be if they could be sent about the farm independently.<sup>61</sup>

It seemed to make sense, therefore, from the security aspect as well as from a practical and economic point of view, for the government to relax the rules governing German prisoners. As a result restrictions were modified after VE Day to allow small groups of unescorted prisoners to work in agriculture and forestry and to permit the billeting of thousands of others on individual farms.<sup>62</sup> What had previously been considered a 'risk not worth taking' now 'paid off': the German prisoners proved themselves to be hard-working, efficient and trustworthy. Indeed, after June 1945 it was repeatedly acknowledged by employers that German POWs constituted an invaluable form of manpower and were more productive and more highly disciplined than their Italian counterparts.<sup>63</sup> Inevitably, the success of the enterprise had significant implications for others engaged in the farming industry.

The presence of hundreds of thousands of German prisoners on the land was bound to affect farmers' attitudes towards many of the current labour concerns, particularly the issue of minimum wage rates. Indeed, although many farmers readily admitted that they were well satisfied with the performance of their POW workers, they were also, ultimately, being charged for their labour. It was, therefore, important for them that as low a wage rate as possible should be maintained for the prisoners in order to maximise profit and keep prices down.<sup>64</sup> In negotiations with the government on the issue of POW wages it was clearly more beneficial for the National Farmers' Union (NFU) to stress the disadvantages encountered by the farmer employing

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<sup>61</sup> TNA: PRO MAF 47/132, 16 February 1945.

<sup>62</sup> Henry Faulk, *Group Captives*, 32. Faulk estimates that approximately 25,000 prisoners were eventually billeted with individual farmers.

<sup>63</sup> TNA: PRO MAF 47/138, Agricultural Committee Letter to the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, 23 June 1945.

<sup>64</sup> TNA: PRO MAF 47/138, Charges to Farmers for POW Labour, 23 June 1945.

prisoners rather than any advantages. At one such meeting, held at the Ministry of Agriculture on 1 July 1946, the NFU submitted fifteen points in support of its recommendation to pay prisoners at a 'special rate' of 1s 1d per hour, 2d per hour less than they were currently earning and significantly less than the typical 'rate for the job' of 1s 5d per hour paid to the male British farm worker.<sup>65</sup> The NFU put forward the argument, amongst others, that the reduced figure was justified on the basis that the productivity of prisoners of war was low compared with that of the British worker because of language difficulties, which, it claimed, the prisoners sometimes exploited in order to avoid work. The union also complained that it was common practice for POWs to arrive late and depart early from the work-place, causing a loss of working time, and that the one-hour break during the working day to which prisoners were entitled and which was included in their work-time, often caused inconvenience to the farmer. Finally, the 'growing exasperation of the farmers' with regard to these points was cited as representing a 'menace' to Britain's food production campaign, which was so vitally important to the fulfilment of Labour's social promises.

However, while attention was drawn to some of the inconveniences involved, the significant advantages to the farmer gained from the employment of German prisoners of war were deliberately left out of the equation. A farmer employing POWs, after all, was relieved of certain costs for which he was liable when employing British workers. For example, prisoners of war, unlike British farm workers, were transported to and from work at no cost to the farmer.<sup>66</sup> He was exempt from paying

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<sup>65</sup> TNA: PRO MAF 47/132, Notes of a Meeting to Discuss Charges for Prisoner of War Labour, 1 July 1946; TNA: PRO MAF 47/138, Revision of Rates Payable by Farmers for Prisoners Employed in Agriculture. The British agricultural worker's pay was decided by each county's War Agricultural Executive Committee. There were variations in the basic rate for male agricultural workers. For example, in a letter to MAF dated 31 July 1945 the Committee for Buckinghamshire stated that it was paying its male workers 1s 8d an hour. Women farm workers across the country typically earned 1s per hour and WLA workers 1s 3d.

<sup>66</sup> TNA: PRO MAF 47/138, letter from MOL to MAF, 24 July 1945.

the employer's contribution to National Health and Unemployment Insurance and insurance under the Workmen's Compensation Act, and also made no payment for periods of sickness or during holidays.<sup>67</sup> Although these savings possibly appeared exploitative to those protesting against what they saw as 'slave labour', they more than compensated the farmers for any difficulties created by the language barrier or any slight reduction in the prisoners' working day.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, it was hard to deny the fact that in 1946, despite certain negative aspects, German prisoners of war formed an indispensable part of Britain's agricultural labour force and, according to many observers, had proven to be more hard-working and efficient than not only the Italian but often the male British worker.<sup>69</sup>

Naturally, the possibility of paying prisoners a 'special rate' caused concern to British workers who believed that this step would lead to their displacement in favour of cheap prisoner labour. Throughout late 1945 and the first half of 1946 the Labour administration, in line with its commitment to address issues of pay through a process of consultation and agreement, engaged in discussion with the NFU and the workers' unions before taking action on the question of prisoner-wages. In January 1946, the National Union of Agricultural Workers (NUAW) argued that, despite the government's earlier promise that the employment of POWs would be dependent on the unavailability of British labour, the inducement of allowing the farmer to pay a cheaper rate for prisoners was already having a detrimental impact on the economic position of British farm workers generally – a situation that was bound to deteriorate

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<sup>67</sup> TNA: PRO MAF 47/138, Charges for Italian and German Prisoners of War Employed in Agriculture, 11 September 1945.

<sup>68</sup> Hansard HOC, 1 July 1947 and 28 October 1947. Complaints were heard in the House of Commons that Article 27 of the Geneva Convention on compensation for death or injury at work was in abeyance and that there were no guidelines on illness. The resentment of the POWs and the concern of the War Office brought about an improvement in this state of affairs and injured men received half their average pay, provided they had not been injured by their own negligence.

<sup>69</sup> TNA: PRO MAF 47/138, Charges for Italian and German Prisoners of War, 11 September 1945.

as the number of prisoners in the industry continued to increase at a substantial rate during the course of 1946.<sup>70</sup> Among those considered already disadvantaged by the presence of prisoners of war on the land were members of the Women's Land Army. There were examples from across the country - in Lincolnshire, Essex and Hampshire - where WLA girls were 'stood off', or put on short time or on reduced wages by employers keen to extend their use of German prisoners.<sup>71</sup> It was also noted that 'free' workers found that their ability to negotiate piece-rates with farmers for tasks such as carting, harvesting and corn cutting were diminished through the employment of prisoners on hourly rates. At best, according to the NUAW, this deprived many of its members of enhanced wages, which, it was felt, they had 'the right to expect'. At worst, workers who complained about their loss of income were often fired and replaced by POWs.<sup>72</sup> As British farm workers saw it, farmers employed Germans because it suited 'their book - and their pocket'.<sup>73</sup> In the view of the NUAW, the only solution to this dilemma was to request the swift repatriation of all German prisoners to Germany.<sup>74</sup>

Whilst they continued to press the concerns of agricultural workers in their meeting with MAF in January 1946, TUC representatives also appreciated that the discontinuation of POW labour at this juncture would be regarded by the Ministries concerned as out of the question. After all, the manpower situation in agriculture remained critical and it would be impossible to produce the amount of food needed with a workforce thus diminished. To make matters worse, by mid-December 1945,

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<sup>70</sup> Hansard HOC, 21 February 1945; MSS 292/881 423/7 T519, Statement to be presented to the Ministers of Agriculture and of Labour by the NUAW, 'Prisoners of War on the Land', 22 January 1946.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> TNA: PRO MAF 47/138, memorandum from the Ministry of Labour to the Ministry of Agriculture, 24 July 1945.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

the government had received pessimistic harvest forecasts and during January it became increasingly clear that the world faced an acute shortage of essential grains and fats.<sup>75</sup> Shortages were particularly grave in devastated Germany, and India too was on the brink of another famine.<sup>76</sup> Britain was committed in her capacity as occupier and imperial power to meet some of these shortages as well as feeding its own population, and this was inevitably going to be of greater concern to the government than the composition of its agricultural labour force.<sup>77</sup> Therefore, rather than pressing for the withdrawal of POWs from the industry, the TUC instead stressed the importance of paying them the 'rate for the job' to avoid harmful repercussions. Indeed, according to its report, there was public hostility to Germans generally in the country, which was only made worse by the British workers' sense of injustice at having to compete with their former enemy for jobs knowing that he, the prisoner, ultimately held the 'upper hand'.<sup>78</sup> The TUC also reminded the government that the farmer received guaranteed, fixed prices for his products, prices which had been based on the cost of British labour. This meant, in effect, that farmers employing POWs profited twice: firstly as a result of the cheaper rates paid to prisoners, and secondly, on the sale of their produce.<sup>79</sup> However, at no point during the discussions did the TUC, though ostensibly the representative and defender of workers' interests, suggest that the extensive use of POW labour was morally and ethically unacceptable: it was a simple matter of ensuring that the conditions surrounding the employment of prisoners of war did not collide with the interests of the British worker.

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<sup>75</sup> *Labour's First Year: The Facts*, 15-16.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>77</sup> MSS 292/881 423/7 T519, TUC Report of Deputation to Ministers of Labour and Agriculture, 22 January 1946.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

Faced with two conflicting arguments, the government was no doubt aware of the need to tread very carefully. On the one hand it was important to avoid industrial disputes in agriculture at this crucial moment. Ministers therefore listened 'sympathetically' to the case put forward by the TUC and the workers' unions and offered piecemeal solutions to some of their concerns, including the establishment of district panels, each comprising a farmer, a farm worker and an independent member, to examine labour disputes involving German prisoners, as well as a rather vague promise to review pay rates for prisoners 'as early as possible'.<sup>80</sup> On the other hand, consideration needed to be paid to some of the broader economic issues before making a decision. For example, would matching the pay of prisoners with that of civilian farm workers have the effect of slowing down the latter's rate of production? Would maintaining a lower wage rate for prisoners, as farmers hoped to do, adversely affect prisoner morale and consequently reduce their output? Then again, would an increase in POW wages, just at the beginning of the harvest, have a psychological effect on the farmer, perhaps leading to a demand for a revision of crop prices, which the government simply could not afford?

In the 'the spirit of Geneva' Ministers might have referred to the Convention's guidelines on this issue, which specified that prisoners of war should be paid 'according to a tariff corresponding to the work executed', or, in other words, at the 'rate for the job'.<sup>81</sup> And, indeed, in other sectors of the economy where POWs were employed, such as forestry, brick-making and public works, that was generally the case.<sup>82</sup> But, this was not the situation in agriculture, where rates of pay accorded

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Article 34(a) of the Geneva Convention relating to the treatment of prisoners of war, 1929.

<sup>82</sup> Hansard HOC, 14 March 1946, col. 246. The Minister of Labour, Mr Isaacs, told the House that 'Employers of prisoners of war are required to pay for them at the appropriate rate for the job. Unless a special rate applicable to prisoners has been agreed in a particular industry by the appropriate joint negotiating machinery, the appropriate rate is that which applies to British labour.'

civilian farm workers were controlled by the War Agricultural Executive Committees in each county, leading to variations in what was fixed as the 'rate for the job', and where farmers themselves were in a position to wield considerable influence when it came to negotiating prices for their commodities. Here, there were always competing interests to be considered - those of farmers, consumers and workers – all of which had to be juggled by the government. Not surprisingly, therefore, Ministers managed to avoid committing themselves one way or the other on the issue of POW wages. Instead, they appealed to the consciences of all concerned, requiring individual 'sacrifice' at such a critical time in the food production process rather than conflict.<sup>83</sup>

Ironically, it was not the attitude of farmers, workers or their trade unions that eventually prompted a change in pay rate for German POWs, but rather that of the prisoners themselves. During the early post-war months, according to Henry Faulk, who, it will be remembered, was in charge of the prisoner 're-education' programme after the war, the issue of pay was of secondary importance to the prisoners by comparison with the sense of making a contribution through their labour or the hope that through their willingness to work they could help disprove the unfavourable collective reputation that the Germans had acquired.<sup>84</sup> In addition, at this stage prisoners believed that their repatriation was imminent, and few, if any, understood that the Geneva Convention's rules governing the treatment of POWs had been superseded by a new 'policy'.<sup>85</sup> Considerations such as these sustained a high morale among the working prisoners and a corresponding efficiency in the workplace, which was often acknowledged by employers as well as fellow-workers. However, during the course of 1946 this enthusiasm diminished. Long working hours, reduced rations, a lack of firm commitment from the government on repatriation arrangements, and the

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<sup>83</sup> *Labour's First Year: The Facts*, 18.

<sup>84</sup> Henry Faulk, *Group Captives*, 43.

<sup>85</sup> The 'new policy' refers collectively to the terms of Unconditional Surrender.



general belief that the Geneva Convention was being ignored, led many prisoners to regard themselves as the 'whipping boys' for the whole German people and, as the War Office put it, 'slaves by right of conquest'.<sup>86</sup> It was noted that as morale declined productivity sank and there was a danger that without some sort of inducement the work of the POWs would eventually be of no economic value at all.<sup>87</sup>

The prospect of increasing prisoner pay was, as has already been mentioned, problematic. It was therefore left to individual farmers to try to obtain maximum effort from their prisoner workers by dint of illicit offerings of extra food, cigarettes and even money. This incurred a warning from the government that such actions would result in the 'immediate withdrawal of the prisoners from the offending employer's service'.<sup>88</sup> Nevertheless, by the middle of 1946 the practice had become widespread and, with an ever-increasing demand for their labour, POWs were placed in a position where they could demand these illegal subsidies with some certainty of receiving them. As Kurt Bock, who worked on the land at Castlemartin, Pembrokeshire, recalled:

The farmer...had to pay the Government the normal wage for our work, and was not supposed to give us extra – not even lunch or supper and certainly not alcohol. However, all the farmers knew that they could not hope to get much work out of us without giving us at least breakfast, lunch or tea.<sup>89</sup>

There was concern that if such a situation was allowed to continue a sense of injustice would again be aroused among both farmers and regular British farm workers, as well as prisoners of war engaged in other industries to whom such inducements were not held out.<sup>90</sup> Officials therefore set about devising more concrete measures to help raise the morale of the prisoners and thereby increase their productivity. By late December

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<sup>86</sup> TNA: PRO MAF 47/132, War Office memorandum, 17 January 1947.

<sup>87</sup> Hansard HOC, 15 February 1946.

<sup>88</sup> *The Times*, 14 July 1945.

<sup>89</sup> Kurt Bock, cited in Miriam Kochan, *Prisoners of England* (London: Macmillan Press, 1980), 120.

<sup>90</sup> Hansard HOC, 2 May 1946, col. 343.

1946 the ban on fraternisation had been lifted, which meant that prisoners could now socialise freely with the British public, and, at the beginning of 1947, the government also began to implement changes in pay and conditions.

Prisoners in agriculture earned in excess of sixty shillings per week, which was paid by the farmer directly to the War Office.<sup>91</sup> The government retained a large proportion of this sum to cover the costs of camp administration as well as the maintenance of the prisoners. Fifteen shillings was actually paid to the prisoner himself, approximately half of which he received in the form of vouchers which could only be spent in the camp canteen, and the balance in credits to be paid upon repatriation. From June 1947, however, while the total amount received by the prisoners remained the same, the credit available for them to spend was increased: thirty per cent of their earnings would be received in British money, thirty per cent in vouchers and the remaining forty per cent in credits.<sup>92</sup>

While the new formula, which applied to all working POWs, removed certain inequalities in pay and conditions and gave prisoners the opportunity to purchase goods hitherto unavailable to them, these improvements did have cost implications. The Secretary of State for War, for example, estimated that sterling payments to prisoners would lead to an increase in his Department's POW expenditure of around £1.5 million a year.<sup>93</sup> It was also felt that any concessions under which prisoners were enabled to buy goods in the ordinary shops might not only lead to shortages in the already scarce goods available to civilians, but would also reduce the profits obtained on sales in the camp canteens, which were used to help defray the cost of camp administration. The new measures, therefore, seemed to pose a host of other potential

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<sup>91</sup> This figure is an approximation based on a forty-eight hour working week at 1s3d per hour.

<sup>92</sup> TNA: PRO CAB134/301, Foreign Labour Committee Meeting on 'Incentives for Prisoners of War', 1 October 1947.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

problems for the government. Nevertheless, within a short period of time the new scheme of incentives did appear to be achieving its object, in that prisoners' morale was said to have quickly improved and their output increased; the government no doubt believed that the incentives offered a more than satisfactory trade-off.

Wages and incentives to prisoners were not always the only source of dispute, however, and instances occurred where the mere presence of German POWs in the workforce caused friction. This was because many workers felt that their position in bargaining for improved pay and conditions should have been a strong one during a period of full employment; instead it was being undermined by the availability of such large numbers of POWs. This was not an entirely new phenomenon, since during the war the employment of Italian prisoners in a number of industries had caused similar resentment: in December 1944 the TUC advised the Ministry of Labour of objections to this practice which it had received from its members. In the railway industry, for example, where Italian POWs were mainly employed to load coal into trucks, remove ashes from locomotive sheds and clean out carriages, the 'principal difficulties' experienced by civilian workers on similar duties were cited as '(a) general resentment towards the prisoners; (b) failure of the Companies to notify representatives of the men of their proposed employment; and (c) the transference of British labour to other jobs.'<sup>94</sup> These complaints were echoed by representatives of workers in the woollen textiles industry, in engineering, in the iron and steel trades and in agriculture, where it was readily admitted that workers would be 'glad to see the back of [the Italian POWs] as soon as possible'.<sup>95</sup>

Three years later, in 1947, workers still found themselves confronted by similar problems, only now these were caused by the presence of German prisoners. This

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<sup>94</sup> MSS 292/881.423/7 T519, TUC report to the Ministry of Labour, Employment of Italian Prisoners of War, 12 December 1944.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

frustration, however, must be understood in light of the economic climate in Britain at the time. Indeed, 1947 was, in both an economic and political sense, a 'year of crisis' for the Attlee government.<sup>96</sup> This began with the worst four weeks of winter weather since 1881. A fuel crisis, made worse by the bad weather, which isolated communities and closed down factories, was followed by a wave of strikes. With a continuing shortage of the labour needed to produce enough goods to meet spiralling demands, the government predicted that a long period of austerity lay ahead. It appealed to the British people to co-operate fully in efforts to increase productivity, without which, Ministers warned, there could be no wage increases. 'We're Up Against It. We Work or Want' became the slogan used to mobilise a demoralised public.<sup>97</sup> Indeed, it must have appeared to many in 1947 that Britain was not one whit closer to achieving the social justice promised by Labour Ministers in 1945.

In some respects, however, workers were in an economically advantageous position. After all, there were still acute shortages of manpower, and the Labour government desperately needed the co-operation of its existing workforce. In such an environment, therefore, workers might have expected employers to respond more positively to their grievances. However, this was not always the case and some employees, despite the strength of their bargaining position, found it difficult to make their point effectively in matters concerning pay and conditions. For example, in July 1947, the General and Municipal Workers' Union (GMWU) appealed to TUC leaders to draw the government's attention to the case involving a dispute over piecework rates between management and employees at the London Brick Company's Elstow Brick Works.<sup>98</sup> Following a three-week period, during which the management of the

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<sup>96</sup> Kenneth Harris, *Attlee*, 332.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 340.

<sup>98</sup> MSS 292/881.423/8 T2147, letter from General Municipal Workers' Union to G.W. Woodcock, Assistant General Secretary, TUC, 4 July 1947.

works had done nothing towards reaching some sort of agreement on the matter, the men stopped work, only to find themselves replaced by German prisoners of war. The GMWU suggested that all relevant employers should be informed by the MOL to refrain in future from employing POWs on any jobs where a dispute had occurred in order to avoid 'exceptionally bad reactions' from British workers.<sup>99</sup>

Other suggestions were made by members of the public who, although not objecting to the employment of prisoners of war as such, felt that they could be put to better use and in situations where they would do 'no harm to our own people'.<sup>100</sup> One correspondent asked whether prisoners could work on the restoration of houses across the country that had been requisitioned by the military authorities during the war, 'as these men are obviously undercutting and tending to keep down the wages of our own workers'.<sup>101</sup> As the period of austerity continued, feelings on the issue of prisoner-labour became more strident. This was accentuated by the government's controversial decision to introduce bread rationing in 1946, which was followed by savage cuts in food imports and the reduction of rations in other essential commodities, such as clothes and petrol, during 1947. These measures led to a public outcry against what was perceived to be government mismanagement. Naturally, the nutritional adequacy of the British post-war diet was hotly debated and many unfavourable conclusions were drawn. The Labour government maintained that although there was little surplus the diet was in fact adequate and nutritionally well balanced. Ministers took pride in pointing out that there was also greater equality in consumption and, moreover, that special measures had been taken to ensure the good health of vulnerable groups such as children. However, despite this optimistic assessment, as well as the lack of hard evidence that public health was actually deteriorating as a result of the cuts, it was the

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> MSS 292/881.423/8 T2147, letter from Mrs Ada Hill in Kent to the TUC, 22 January 1946.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

opposite argument that received most attention. For example, an article published in *The Medical Press* in May 1947 under the emotive headline 'Dying England', received extensive press coverage. It argued that rationed and un-rationed foods combined amounted to less than 2,100 calories per day, 'yet the average moderately active man must eat 3,000 calories daily and the average housewife 2,500 calories in order to provide the energy used up in a full day's work....In other words, everyone in England is suffering from prolonged, chronic malnutrition.'<sup>102</sup> The power of this argument, which to many no doubt seemed to correspond with reality, helped create a general perception that the government had abandoned its socialist commitment to provide fair shares for the British people, who were being allowed to 'starve to death'. Consequently, it is not surprising that anger was also focused on the continuing presence of hundreds of thousands of German POWs in the country, who, it was pointed out, might be helping to stock 'the nation's larder' but were doing so at great expense to the nation's 'purse'. Indeed, to one observer, the repatriation of the POWs would be no great loss to Britain, but rather '200,000 less mouths to feed, 200,000 less bodies to clothe and care for in sickness, 200,000 less to house'.<sup>103</sup>

Considering the extent to which prisoner labour was used in Britain after the war, and the fact that the practice received so much attention both from those who regarded the POWs as a drain on the nation's finances and from others who felt that they were being exploited as 'slave labour', it is remarkable that the financial equivalent of their work was never calculated in the War Office's account books, even though the British government had envisaged such labour as constituting a valuable form of reparations. The reason behind so important an omission is unclear, although it is possible that the government's inaction was determined by a variety of factors. In the first place, there

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<sup>102</sup> Cited in Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain*, 221.

<sup>103</sup> MSS 292/881.423/8 T2147, letter from Mr Ian Adams to the TUC, 28 October 1947. There were still approximately 267,000 German POWs in Britain at this time.

was simply no political incentive for Britain to make known what profits, or otherwise, accrued from the employment of German prisoners of war. Indeed, as discussed in an earlier chapter, the idea of German manpower as a viable form of reparations had been dismissed by the Americans and Russians during inter-Allied discussions in Yalta and Potsdam and at meetings of the Allied Reparations Commission: POW labour ultimately came to be seen by them as nothing more than 'war booty'.<sup>104</sup> Since they had no intention of doing so for the USSR, the Soviets were therefore unlikely to demand of the British government that it produce accounts relating to the labour value of POWs held in the UK.

Moreover, in ethical terms it was no doubt better, given the choice, to avoid declaring a profit on such labour, which might have further antagonised those, like Richard Stokes, who were lobbying against what they considered to be a policy of 'slavery'. Furthermore, from a socio-political perspective, such a declaration could have led to unwanted reactions among the German people in the British occupation zone, who might have questioned a political system that appeared to be profiting by deliberately depriving them of the means, in terms of manpower, to alleviate the many material hardships they were having to endure. However, by the same token, there was no sense in declaring that the cost of providing for the POWs actually amounted to more, in financial terms, than the value of their labour. During difficult times this would have caused resentment among the British public, and, moreover, would have undermined the basic rationale behind the POW labour policy, which was that it was essential to the reconstruction of Britain and her economy.

The Labour government was naturally challenged on the issue of the accounts and responded by explaining the practical difficulties involved in making such a

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<sup>104</sup> See Chapter Three, 'Labour Reparations'.

calculation. During a House of Commons debate held on 25 June 1946 Ministers were asked to declare the total amount by which the British Exchequer had benefited from moneys paid by employers of prisoners of war in the previous financial year.<sup>105</sup> The Secretary of State for War replied that, although the government was in receipt of £36 million in respect of prisoner labour, arriving at an estimate of any profit or loss was impossible since the cost of maintenance and other expenses relating to prisoners of war could not be calculated without, he insisted, 'a disproportionate amount of work by hard-pressed staffs' which could 'not be justified' given the prevailing manpower situation.<sup>106</sup> And, indeed, there is other evidence to suggest that the whole task of keeping efficient prisoner-of-war records was becoming problematic for the War Office, due to the sheer number of POWs employed in the United Kingdom and the lack of personnel available to deal with them. In June 1946, for example, the work of the German Index Section of the Prisoner of War Information Bureau was said to have 'grown beyond the capacity of the small temporary staff available'. Consequently, the task of keeping POW records in the UK was transferred over to prisoners of war themselves.<sup>107</sup>

On the other hand, the government's approach towards the financial aspects involved possibly reflected the attitudes of men like Attlee and Dalton, who did not particularly concern themselves with the moral arguments surrounding the use of German prisoner labour. They considered that instead of having a 'special account' for prisoner labour, as suggested by others in the Party, it would be better to imagine a much simpler, and far less problematic, 'balance sheet' showing that the ultimate benefit gained from the employment of prisoners of war was bigger harvests gathered

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<sup>105</sup> Hansard HOC, 25 June 1946, col. 151.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Hansard HOC, 25 June 1946, col. 149-150.



in for the nation.<sup>108</sup> Whether any other form of profit was made from the prisoners seemed to be of no consequence, although Dalton, responding to an attack by Richard Stokes during a discussion on the subject in the Commons, openly admitted that, given the choice, he ‘would sooner make a profit than a loss’.<sup>109</sup>

The employment of German prisoners of war had, throughout the period in question, raised a number of concerns among POWs, employers, British workers, trade unions, members of the general public and Members of Parliament, all of which required a response from the Labour government. This was because each group had high expectations of a new administration whose manifesto had promised to bring about a system of ‘social justice’ for all. For most workers this meant employment which offered fair terms of pay and conditions, freedom to negotiate terms and be heard on matters in dispute, and enjoying a minimum degree of material comfort and well-being as a result of their strenuous efforts. For others, ‘social justice’ had an even broader meaning: it was also felt to be the duty of the Labour Party to help bring about international ‘social justice’, in line with traditional socialist thinking. However, the employment of prisoners of war in Britain after 1945 brought the government’s commitment to this ideal sharply into question. POWs quickly became aware that their rights under international law were limited, to say the least, and the government’s continual reference to ‘the spirit of Geneva’ hardly improved matters. British workers, particularly in agriculture, complained that the availability of prisoner labour not only restricted their ability to bargain for better wages and conditions but also, in some cases, actually resulted in their displacement. The unions, although voicing disapproval of these practices, were forced to accept the fact that until large-scale demobilisation had taken place the employment of prisoners would

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<sup>108</sup> Hansard HOC, 16 July 1946, col.1045.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

have to continue and that the conditions surrounding their employment would be determined by the government ministries concerned and not be influenced by workers or their trade union representatives. For many in the Labour Party, too, the acceptance of POW labour meant a concomitant rejection of democratic socialist principles and newly-established international laws, both of which condemned the use of people as slaves.

The labour reparations policy therefore departed significantly, and for some unforgivably, from what was expected of a socialist government. However, while the policy did raise moral and ethical dilemmas, there is no doubt that it also helped the Labour Party meet important commitments that it had made to the population of Great Britain. Indeed, the primary concern for the government was ensuring that Britain was producing enough food and goods to sustain her own population and to meet export demands. Without German prisoners, who, as already mentioned, made up one quarter of the agricultural workforce in 1946, the chances of achieving these aims would have been severely compromised. What remains uncertain, however, is whether they generated a financial profit in absolute terms. Despite the assertion by Sir Alec Cairncross that 'there is no evidence that commercial considerations exercised a decisive influence on British reparations policy in 1945', the fact remains that, with regard to this particular aspect of British policy, the absence of 'evidence' in the form of official accounting makes it impossible to refute the claim made by MPs like Richard Stokes that after 1945 the Labour government did indeed exploit prisoners of war economically and made substantial profits from their labour.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Sir Alec Cairncross, *The Price of War: British Policy on German Reparations 1941-1949* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1986), 75.

## CHAPTER SIX

### The Re-education of German Prisoners of War in Britain

During the course of 1943 and 1944, while engaged in formulating a proposal for obtaining reparations from Germany in the form of POW labour, the British government was considering another policy that was to have significant consequences for the German people as a whole after the war. A programme of 're-education' – a political indoctrination campaign involving the control and management of the media, in the shape of the press, radio and cinema, the re-writing of school books and the reform of German schools and universities – was to be implemented in Germany after its defeat and was intended 'to waken a sense of political responsibility and to foster ideas of popular democracy (to include freedom of speech, of press and of religion)'.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, according to officials at the Foreign Office, re-education would enable Britain to 'stamp out the whole tradition on which the German nation has been built up', in other words to eradicate ideas and ideals behind Prussian militarism, which, it was firmly believed, had allowed National Socialism to flourish in Germany, and substitute for them the ethical, philosophical and political ideas of Great Britain.<sup>2</sup> This essentially British policy, which was ambitiously aimed at Germany's 'mind' rather than her 'body', eventually gained the approval of the major Allies and in August 1945 was incorporated in the Potsdam Agreement on the post-war treatment of Germany, where it featured among what were referred to as the 'The Four Ds': De-militarisation, De-Nazification, Democratisation and De-industrialisation.

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<sup>1</sup> TNA: PRO FO371/39093, Memorandum on the Re-education of Germany, February 1944.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

However, almost a year before the Potsdam Agreement was concluded, Britain had embarked independently upon what was regarded by officials as the 'trial phase' of the re-education process. On 18 September 1944, the British Cabinet requested the Political Warfare Executive (PWE) to undertake the task of re-educating German prisoners of war. From the outset the whole operation was fraught with problems and its outcome was always uncertain. This was because the success of the scheme depended, firstly, upon a system of interrogation, classification and ultimately segregation of prisoners according to their political outlook, which was often inefficient and inconsistent. It also relied on the availability of British personnel who, for a number of reasons, were often unable or unwilling to implement the policy with the necessary zeal. But, perhaps most importantly, re-education was only one aspect of prisoner life and had to compete with other, more negative aspects, such as material shortages and delayed repatriation. This often led prisoners to contrast negatively the ideal of democracy as embodied in the re-education programme with the stark realities of British democracy as they experienced them at first hand.

Ultimately, however, the considerable challenges which the government met with in its attempt to bring about a change of heart among the prisoners did not deter it from extending the programme to the whole German population after the war. On the contrary, as war ended in Europe it was felt, perhaps more than at any time since the concept had been launched, that it was Britain's 'unavoidable duty' to fulfil the task of re-educating the German people.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, then, the benefits of the policy were seen as far outweighing the problems encountered. In order to see what these expected benefits were, the following chapter considers not only some of the many processes involved in re-educating German prisoners of war, including any obstacles that

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<sup>3</sup> *The Times*, 8 May 1945, Letter to the Editor from Robert Birley, Headmaster of Charterhouse, and, between 1947 and 1949, Education Adviser to the Control Commission for Germany.

needed to be overcome in practice, but, more especially, the effect that the programme actually had on the political outlook and well-being of the prisoners themselves and whether these changes in attitude sufficed ultimately to bring about what the British officials involved in drawing up the policy had originally intended.

The question of how Germany should be democratised had been raised much earlier than 1943. Indeed, during 1917 the idea of 'democratising Germany' had conditioned much of the debate between the Allied nations on what to do with that country after the end of the Great War. This idea was based on the simple, yet characteristically American, assumption that all people share the same values and that forcing Germany to change to a democratic constitution was essentially all that was required to put matters right. In Britain, which, it should be remembered, was an imperial power and not unaccustomed to the concept of teaching lessons in the British notion of democracy, there developed a far broader debate in which the idea of 'educating' Germany arose. In 1919, however, there was great reluctance, particularly within the Foreign Office, to adopt so radical an approach, as this would necessarily have involved large-scale interference in Germany's internal affairs – a principle that was anathema to the traditional view of how international relations should be conducted. In addition, the idea of transplanting democracy to Germany risked provoking embarrassing questions regarding Britain's role in the suppression of the national uprisings and civil conflicts then taking place in Russia, India and Northern Ireland. Indeed, in such instances how could Britain confidently claim to be adhering to democratic principles herself? Recognising these difficulties, the Political Intelligence Department (PID) of the Foreign Office concluded in October 1918:

The truth is that by demanding 'the democratisation of Germany' we may easily get into a very awkward and delicate position.... At this moment we are chiefly occupied with the German government, but the weapon is one that may be used by others.... We do not wish to have the

discussion on changes in our own constitution carried on under external pressure. It may be suggested that it would be wise as quickly as possible to get back to the old and sound principle that the internal forms of government in any one nation are not the concern of other nations.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, rather than imposing a system of re-education on Germany in 1918 it was hoped that instead she would, as the Foreign Secretary, A.J. Balfour put it, 'work out her own salvation' entirely through the good will of the German people.<sup>5</sup>

It was during the inter-war period that re-education developed as a political concept, coinciding with the massive changes that were taking place in the manner in which both domestic and foreign policy was conducted. Central to this new approach was the advent of a propaganda revolution and the realisation that modern persuasion techniques were a vital concomitant to the more traditional method of influencing opinion. 'This generation', wrote one theorist, A.J. Mackenzie, in 1938, 'is witnessing a boom in propaganda. Never before has there been such widespread ceaseless activity on the mental front.'<sup>6</sup> Yet, far from being regarded as the 'dark art of persuasion', as was the case after 1945, propaganda was considered at this time to be an effective way of enlightening or educating the public on matters that directly concerned them. Moreover, the fact that Britain's democratic system allowed for competing political views to be expressed through such methods also meant that her citizens could make informed choices when it came to exercising their franchise.

The use of propaganda, in this sense, was not limited to the domestic sphere. On the contrary, in response to the urgent problems of the 1930s caused by the emergence of totalitarian states in Europe – both communist and fascist – positive steps were taken by the Foreign Office to promote Britain and British ideas abroad. The new 'cultural diplomacy' was called 'The Projection of England', a phrase first coined by

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<sup>4</sup> TNA: PRO CAB 24/65, 3 October 1918, PID memorandum.

<sup>5</sup> TNA: PRO FO371/4375, 30 July 1917, A.J. Balfour's address to the House of Commons.

<sup>6</sup> A.J. Mackenzie, *Propaganda Boom* (London: The Right Book Club, 1938), 9.

Sir Stephen Tallents in an influential pamphlet published under that title in 1932, and it was before long to be placed under the control of the newly formed British Council, established in 1934.<sup>7</sup> Its role was to offer foreign audiences an alternative ideology through the projection of British democratic institutions and all that was considered best in the British way of life. The importance of the Council's educative role to those charged with carrying it out should not be underestimated. Its first chairman, Lord William Tyrrell, said in 1936:

We have much to learn from others but we also have much to teach them. If we do not do the teaching ourselves, we shall be misunderstood and misinterpreted. If you will regard us as a body able and willing to do this educational work abroad, may I ask you also to regard us as people who are assisting practically in our national defence. Modern defence consists not only in arms but in removing misunderstanding.<sup>8</sup>

Clearly then, by the outbreak of the Second World War this particular form of 'education' had become allied with the normal instruments of power as a means of exerting influence and mobilising prestige abroad, with the aim of reaching certain political objectives. That this general approach led to the formulation of a specific policy for the re-education of post-war Germany can, however, be attributed to the continuity of personnel and of anti-German sentiment that characterised the Foreign Office during the inter-war period and after 1939.

The Political Intelligence Department had been established during the First World War under the chairmanship of William Tyrrell specifically to address the need to employ propaganda as a new weapon of war. It was staffed by young officials originally recruited from the spheres of education, journalism and academic life, who all shared the view that the dynamics of German foreign policy were historically predetermined. Following the abolition of this department in 1919, many of its junior

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<sup>7</sup> Stephen Tallents, *The Projection of England* (1932), cited in P.M. Taylor, 'British Official Attitudes Towards Propaganda Abroad', in N. Pronay and D.W. Spring (eds.), *Propaganda, Politics and Film 1918-1945* (London: Macmillan Press, 1982), 28.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 39, Lord Tyrrell to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, 27 January 1936.

members, such as the famous propagandist Rex Leeper, found positions in the Foreign Office and its reconstructed News Department, the first post-war head of which was Robert Vansittart, the author of *Black Record*.<sup>9</sup> The more senior members of the PID joined the newly founded Royal Institute of International Affairs at Chatham House. Hence, the continuous presence of personnel such as Tyrrell and Vansittart, who were both later to reach the position of Permanent Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign Office, and were therefore in positions of considerable influence, led to a dominance of their views in the 1930s debate on how to respond to the rise of National Socialism in Germany, and, while attempts were made to redress this bias during the period of appeasement, they were largely vitiated by the outbreak of war in 1939. It is not surprising, therefore, that it was this element which was made responsible for rebuilding the offshoot of the Foreign Office tasked with directing propaganda at the enemy. The newly named Political Warfare Executive (PWE), a covert agency under the joint control of the Foreign Secretary, Minister of Information and Minister of Economic Warfare, was duly established, with Rex Leeper at its head. Its creation, according to Nicholas Pronay:

...marked the culmination of the line of thinking which led from the First World War to the production of plans for re-education and their realisation after the Second World War. It represented the triumph eventually of the line of argument known as 'Vansittartism'. It was the line of those who saw reason behind the invariable drift of German policies towards hostility and ultimately war against Britain and the rest of Europe in the mind of the German people – and therefore saw the ultimate solution to the problem in changing it.<sup>10</sup>

From July 1941 the PWE, in addition to undertaking the task of formulating a strategy for the re-education of post-war Germany, became responsible for all

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<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Pronay, 'To Stamp Out The Whole Tradition...', in Nicholas Pronay and Keith Wilson (eds.), *The Political Re-education of Germany and Her Allies After World War II* (London & Sydney: Croom Helm, 1985), 17.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.



propaganda amongst prisoners of war in British captivity. The first concerted effort to re-educate prisoners, however, was directed not at German, but Italian POWs in British captivity in India who, by November 1941, numbered 45,676 officers and men.<sup>11</sup> The government's intention in this case was to generate among these prisoners 'friendly sentiments' towards Britain, to 'unite them all spiritually as anti-Germans' and, if possible, to persuade them to fight against the Axis in an anti-fascist Free Italy force, *Italia Redenta* (Italy Redeemed), during the liberation of Italy.<sup>12</sup> The PWE recognised that a careful programme was required if these objectives were to be achieved: prisoners would have to be treated sympathetically and humanely by their captors, 'incurably hostile' or fascist elements would have to be segregated from what the PWE believed to be a preponderance of non-political prisoners, and enough suitable propaganda material, in the form of Italian-language newspapers, periodicals and radio broadcasts, would have to be produced. However, according to Kent Fedorowich, this programme suffered from continual setbacks.<sup>13</sup>

The most significant problem resulted from a failure to establish clear lines of communication between the Foreign Office in London and the military and administrative authorities in India, who were ultimately responsible for implementing the PWE's plans. Consequently, there were many 'grey' areas, and the exploratory nature of the policy made it difficult for those entrusted with the task to improvise. It was perhaps because of this administrative confusion at the centre, as well as a general lack of understanding of the terms 'political warfare' and 're-education', that the camp commandants in India approached the measure with muted disdain. This resulted in a failure to put into effect an adequate system of interrogation and

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<sup>11</sup> Kent Fedorowich, 'Political Warfare and Italian POWs, 1940-3', in Bob Moore and Kent Fedorowich, *Prisoners of War and their Captors in World War II* (Oxford: Berg, 1996), 125.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

segregation, which was often resisted by commandants who depended on Fascist elements within their camps to maintain order and discipline among the prisoners. Although the PWE made concerted efforts to instruct camp staff as to their vital role in the re-education process, and while some progress was made during the course of almost two years, the problems remained largely unresolved. Ultimately, Italy's surrender in September 1943 and the establishment of the country's 'co-belligerent' status meant that Britain no longer needed an *Italia Redenta*. Attention was now turned, however, to the question of how the knowledge gained during the re-education exercise in India could be used to good effect on the increasing number of German POWs coming into British hands.

The most obvious difference between Britain's plans to re-educate Italian and German POWs respectively was that the former programme was not coupled with an intention to extend it to the entire population of Italy after the war. Nor had the British government actively sought to re-educate Italian prisoners in the United Kingdom, who, it argued, were already successfully engaged in agriculture, showed little cause for concern and, in any case, could not be spared for inclusion in an anti-Fascist fighting force. From the beginning, however, the re-education of German prisoners of war was regarded as quite a different prospect with far reaching implications: it was part of, and in a sense a blue-print for, an extremely ambitious plan to democratise an entire country. One might assume, therefore, that the organisational and operational difficulties already encountered during the re-education experiment in India had alerted the government to the complexities involved in such an enterprise and had encouraged it to adopt a revised strategy with a view to meeting its many demands. This, however, appears not to have been the case.

Soon after the Italian surrender, in October 1943, the War Cabinet approved the establishment of an interdepartmental committee to consider the question of the re-education, or re-orientation, of German prisoners of war held in the United Kingdom as well as in Canada, whither the vast majority of POWs captured by the British were transported until 1944. Indeed, it was felt that nowhere was the need for re-education so urgent as in Canada, where POW camps were dominated by groups of 'rabid Nazis' who, according to official reports, were 'working actively and ruthlessly by methods of terror and intimidation to promote fanatical Nazi creeds and doctrines' among the inmates.<sup>14</sup> While the war in Europe continued, of course, it was vitally important that discussions on the subject of re-education should be conducted with a high degree of secrecy. This was largely due to the Geneva Convention's stipulation that prisoners of war were not obliged to offer interrogators any information above and beyond their name, rank and serial number, and that they should not be subjected to any form of political indoctrination. Contravention of this ruling therefore raised moral and legal questions which the government was at pains to avoid. However, officials also had to bear in mind the practical consequences of their actions should they become known to the enemy. Indeed, if Britain was seen to be deliberately flouting the Geneva Convention's rules in this way it was more than possible that Allied prisoners held by the Germans would be liable to be placed in a precarious situation, possibly having to endure an oppressive Nazi-style programme of re-education themselves. In addition to these dangers, there were broader political considerations: how could a policy aimed ultimately at re-educating the German people in democratic principles become public without raising Soviet suspicions? Whose notion of democracy would form the basis of re-education? It would be

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<sup>14</sup> LAC RG25/2784 621-LD-40, Programme of Re-orientation of Prisoners of War in Canada.

difficult, if not impossible, for the Allies to reach unanimity on this problem because whoever filled the political vacuum in Germany would also hold the balance of power in Europe after the war. It is notable that, as a result of this dilemma, Britain's proposal for an inter-Allied agreement on the issue of re-education had to be couched in somewhat anodyne language so that her Allies, particularly the Soviets, could not object to it on ideological grounds. It denounced all teaching which:

- (i) glorifies militarism;
- (ii) seeks to propagate, revive or justify the doctrines of National Socialism, or to exalt the achievements of National Socialist leaders;
- (iii) favours a policy of discrimination on grounds of race or religion;
- (iv) is hostile to, or seeks to disturb the relations between, any of the United Nations;
- (v) expounds the practice of war or of mobilisation and preparation for war, whether in the scientific, economic or industrial fields, or the study of military geography.<sup>15</sup>

Concealment and veiled language were thus the hallmarks of the war-time planning of re-education, and the essential details of the programme, in terms of its political nature as well as its intended outcome, would become clearer only after the war had ended. Until then there would be only a vague understanding of what the policy demanded and how it should be applied to the German prisoners of war already captured.

While the war continued, any hint of a departure from the Geneva Convention's stipulations on the issue was far too risky for the Canadian and United States authorities, politically as well as militarily, and both initially hesitated to take any steps to re-educate the German prisoners held in their respective countries. However, in June 1944, following a series of intensive discussions between the Dominions Office, the Foreign Office, the War Office and PWE, the Canadian government eventually approved the policy. This was a courageous decision as it meant that the

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<sup>15</sup> TNA: PRO CAB87/67, Draft Directive on the Re-education of Germany, 3 July 1944.

Canadian authorities faced the daunting prospect of re-educating 20,000 prisoners, ten times the number held in the United Kingdom at that moment, the majority of whom were regarded as the most fanatical Nazis held in Allied captivity. Given these statistics, the British authorities inevitably found it difficult to grasp the scale of the re-education operation required in the Canadian camps. As a result there were differences of opinion as well as variations in the manner in which the two countries set about organising their POW re-education programmes. Nevertheless, as official documents reveal, there was an attempt at a full, although secret, exchange of information between Britain and Canada on the subject, from which it is clear that there was a general understanding between them as to what was required. Indeed, in August 1944 a liaison officer representing the Political Intelligence Department of the Foreign Office was sent to Canada to provide information about Britain's re-education programme and 'to assist in co-ordinating work in the field of re-orientation of German prisoners of war'.<sup>16</sup> However, a major source of frustration for both the UK and Canadian authorities was the reluctance of the United States government to reveal what steps it was taking towards the re-education of German prisoners of war held there, 175,000 of whom were, by the end of the war, being held by the USA on behalf of the British.<sup>17</sup> No doubt, the US government sought to avoid upsetting the Soviet Union as well as its own public on the issue, particularly at a time when discussions on post-war planning were under way between the major Allied powers. According to the Canadian Ambassador to Washington, reporting in May 1945, the result was that the United States offered her Allies 'no real information of what they

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<sup>16</sup> LAC RG25/2784 621-LD-40, Programme of Re-orientation of Prisoners of War in Canada.

<sup>17</sup> M.B. Sullivan, *Thresholds of Peace: Four Hundred Thousand German Prisoners and the People of Britain* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1979), 23. There was a total of 371,000 German POWs in the United States by the end of the war.

are getting at' with regard to re-education, and that there was a 'haze' as to who was ultimately responsible for the US operation.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, so covert were the activities of all concerned while the war continued that the governments on both sides of the Atlantic were subjected to a certain amount of criticism for neglecting, as it appeared to some at the time, to undertake such a very important task. In October 1944, two months after Canada had launched its POW re-education programme, an article in the *Winnipeg Free Press* urged the government to take immediate action:

The time has come for a bolder policy in regard to German war prisoners than Canada has followed up to now. The problem is full of difficulties. The binding terms of the Geneva Convention dealing with prisoners of war must be respected to the letter. But much can be done. The question of separating the goats from the sheep has already been studied.... But a great deal more can be done.<sup>19</sup>

In January 1945 an article in the United States press expressed similar anxieties:

What will happen to those hundreds of thousands of German prisoners of war.... No one is making an effort to mould these prisoners' minds. No one is giving them anything that might even remotely be construed as propaganda.... Around them, a world is slowly burning out – a world which they themselves, in their barely past days of glory, so wantonly set aflame. They will not see the grand finale; its lesson will be lost on them. They are sitting it out – on the moon. ...the mind of a defeated German looks like one of the cities which his own stupendous crime caused to be laid waste. It is, and will remain, a vacuum. Perhaps a new ideal would rush into it with the force and velocity of air rushing into a vacuum – who knows? No one is bothering to open the valves, and so the challenge goes unanswered.<sup>20</sup>

And in Britain, too, the government was warned in a letter to the editor of *The Times* that it was of the utmost importance that German prisoners of war should not be 'insulated from all the influences which would tend to make them change their

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<sup>18</sup> LAC RG25/3400 621-LD-40C, communication from the Canadian Ambassador to the United States to the Secretary of State for External Affairs, Canada, 24 May 1945.

<sup>19</sup> LAC RG25/2784 621-LD-40, article entitled 'Our Nazi Prisoners', *The Winnipeg Free Press*, 16 October 1944.

<sup>20</sup> LAC RG25/2784 621-LB-40, article entitled 'German Prisoners Talk Your Ears Off' by Ernest O. Hauser, *The Saturday Evening Post*, 20 January 1945.

views', but, on the contrary, should be actively encouraged through a process of re-education to discard their Nazi ideas.<sup>21</sup>

In reality, the American and British governments had already set aside the 'binding terms of the Geneva Convention' on this issue by September 1944 and, although determined to avoid revealing their actual intentions, they had proceeded to introduce the measures necessary to bring their plans to fruition. The first task, and a vital prerequisite for the success of re-education, was the appointment of a sufficient number of personnel suited, by aptitude and training, to carry out so demanding and complex an operation. Immediately after receiving the War Cabinet's instructions to implement re-education among POWs, the PWE set about this initial task. According to Michael Balfour, who was a member of the PWE's organisational team and later appointed head of the re-education programme in the British Zone of Germany, the choice of personnel made no obvious sense and seemed to reflect a 'dubious commitment' to the programme on the part of the British government.<sup>22</sup> The clearest example of this was the appointment of the two men chosen to head the new Prisoner of War Department (POWD). At the head was a Wing Commander, E. H. Hitch, who had come from the world of merchant banking and public relations and spoke no German, and, as his Chief Executive Officer, a former literary agent, Cyrus Brooks.<sup>23</sup> Together these two men established sections to administer various aspects of the programme, including lectures, publications, literature, English teaching, visual aids (including films) and statistics. Perhaps the most important, the Field Section, was responsible for training staff to screen prisoners and grade them according to their political outlook or 'colour': those deemed to be fanatical or 'rabid' Nazis would be

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<sup>21</sup> *The Times*, 17 February 1945, Letter to the Editor.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Balfour, 'In Retrospect: Britain's Policy of "Re-education"', in Nicholas Pronay and Keith Wilson (eds.), *The Political Re-education of Germany and Her Allies After World War II*, 149.

<sup>23</sup> See Michael Balfour, 'In Retrospect', and M.B. Sullivan, *Thresholds of Peace*, 93-96.

classified as 'black'; those whose political conviction was wavering and were thought to pay only lip-service to National Socialism would be considered 'grey'; and others, who were anti-Nazis, some of whom might be suitable to assist the Allies in 'special tasks', would be known as 'whites'.<sup>24</sup> In addition, an Information Section was assigned the vital task of conveying details of the policy to the War Office as well as to the Camp Commandants, whose co-operation was essential, but, as will be discussed later, not always forthcoming.

In theory, at least, the system looked promising. In reality, however, the situation was quite different. This was because the efficiency of the programme depended upon more than just a handful of section leaders: it also required teams of suitable, qualified personnel to man the sections, personnel who, as it soon became apparent, were in short supply. One of the main problems was the shortage of available and competent German speakers who could not only interview the prisoners, but also 'teach' them lessons in democracy afterwards. However, the department was also having to compete with the Control Commission's demand for the recruitment of German speakers in Germany, at the same time as its own requirements continued to increase as the number of German POWs held in Britain also grew. As a result POWD was forced to employ anyone who had the basic qualifications, even after it had sent out requests to all military command units. Many of those recruited by Hitch and Brooks for the tasks had dubious credentials; they tended to be either journalists, broadcasters, academics, or anti-Nazi refugees, chosen for their language skills rather than the depth of their understanding of the psychology of National Socialism or the nature of their own moral and political convictions.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. The 'special tasks' undertaken by 'white' POWs included covert operations in the form of propaganda and intelligence work for the Allies. The Ascot-Brondesbury Scheme in the UK (named after the POW camps set aside for the scheme) involved the training and utilisation of 'white' POWs for 'black' propaganda broadcasts to the enemy. This scheme was set up in December 1944.



Of course, this is not to say that certain efforts were not made to prepare more suitable individuals to carry out the necessary processes. In many cases intelligence officers and camp interpreters underwent a special training course to enable them to categorise prisoners according to their 'colour'. The same course was set up in Canada in June 1944 by Lt.-Col C. Skilbeck, a United Kingdom intelligence officer. Approximately thirty-two intelligence officers, including the Camp Commandants from various POW camps in Canada, followed the ten-day programme.<sup>25</sup> In all, four courses were conducted there and by August 1944 the newly trained personnel had returned to the camps under the guise of 'interpreters' to work on interrogation and segregation. Nevertheless, these measures did not suffice to allow the Canadian authorities to conduct a detailed interrogation programme on the massive scale that was required. By February 1945, the lack of personnel trained to conduct interviews had been made good, to some degree, by the introduction of a seven-part interrogation report which was to be completed by each individual POW. The first six sections of this report required the personal details, general background, POW history, political history, military history and the camp details of the prisoner, while the seventh was reserved for 'examiners' remarks'.<sup>26</sup> On the basis of this report a political profile was duly established for each POW and his 'colour' determined. However, this was also a demanding system, relying as it did on the work of teams of individuals to administer what proved to be a vast amount of paper work. Consequently, it became necessary to curtail interrogations and, in a few of the Canadian POW camps, they were abandoned altogether. Instead, the authorities resorted to drawing up individual profiles based on information obtained from other sources, in particular prison guards and 'politically reliable' prisoners who acted as 'stool pigeons'.

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<sup>25</sup> LAC RG25/2784 621-LD-40, report by the Canadian Minister of External Affairs.

<sup>26</sup> LAC RG25/3400 621-LD-40C, report for the Canadian Military Headquarters in London on the 'Classification and Segregation of POWs in Canada', 12 December 1945.

The situation was quite different on the other side of the Atlantic. From the middle of 1944, prisoners coming into the United Kingdom from the Continent were at once taken for interrogation and classification to the newly established screening centre at Kempton Park race-course. Here, POWs were screened, classified and, in most cases, moved on to one of the base camps, where they were assessed for their suitability to work. Prisoners who were thought to possess detailed information of an operational or technical nature, mostly *Kriegsmarine* or *Luftwaffe* personnel, were transferred to the Combined Services Detailed Interrogation Centre (CSDIC) located at Cockfosters Camp in Barnet, north London, while others went to Ascot Park where a camp had been established for 'friendly' Germans. According to Matthew Barry Sullivan, a screener during the war, the Ascot camp contained

a rather jittery collection of victims of persecution, cosmopolitans and international drifters who found themselves in the wrong uniform; Germans with good connections in England; anti-Nazi prisoners... and men who might, it seemed, be weaned into talking on the BBC.<sup>27</sup>

Only a small proportion, around ten per cent, of the German prisoners who had been interrogated in the UK by the end of the war were identified as 'white', while the majority were placed in the 'grey' (around seventy per cent) and 'black' (around 20 per cent) categories. Whether these statistics give an accurate picture of the political outlook of the prisoners at that time is, however, difficult to gauge, since a major problem with the interrogation and classification process was that it was almost impossible to conduct with any real accuracy or consistency. For example, while the war was ongoing there were many prisoners, especially members of the SS, parachute troops and U-boat crews who, it was generally thought, had been fully imbued with the National Socialist ethos, made no attempt to conceal their commitment to Hitler, and actually prided themselves on their 'blackness'. Others, however, declared their

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<sup>27</sup> M.B. Sullivan, *Thresholds of Peace*, 47.

allegiance out of a sense of self-preservation: not to have been graded 'black' would be regarded as a failure among their fellow inmates and, since they believed that the Geneva Convention protected them anyway, these prisoners felt they had nothing to lose in so doing. In such instances the outcome of screening was largely determined by the prisoners themselves. Nevertheless, others complained that they had been wrongly categorised by screeners who were subjective in their approach and appeared to be operating a political 'witch-hunt' for former National Socialists with the object of allocating blame and punishment.<sup>28</sup> According to Sullivan, at times this resulted in a prisoner being placed in the 'black' category even before being subjected to a thorough interview. He notes, for example, that the intelligence officer at the Devizes Camp in Wiltshire was particularly notorious:

At Devizes Hans Freiburger and his comrades all decided they would enter the screening hut with the 'Heil Hitler' and the Nazi salute...a screener called Herr Reis...would dismiss them immediately with a 'Nazi, jawohl [*sic*], 'raus!'.<sup>29</sup>

Herr Reis was one of many German-speaking Jewish émigrés employed in the interrogation of prisoners of war. Indeed, Kempton Park was reportedly referred to by the POWs as 'the Jew-Camp' where, one ex-inmate testified, 'aggressive Jewish refugees now and then acted up the part of the traditional Prussian NCO, barking orders and throwing their weight about'.<sup>30</sup> No doubt it was a psychological blow for a German soldier to find himself confronted by a Jewish interrogator in British uniform, just as it was inevitable that feelings of anger and vengefulness on the part of the interrogator would occasionally surface. As a result, it is hardly surprising that there was a widespread assumption in government circles that the employment of German Jewish émigrés on such tasks was unjustified. Indeed, as late as October 1946, by

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<sup>28</sup> Henry Faulk, *Group Captives, The Re-education of German Prisoners of War in Great Britain 1945-1948* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1979), 82-3.

<sup>29</sup> M.B. Sullivan, *Thresholds of Peace*, 123.

<sup>30</sup> German parachutist, Colonel von der Heydte, cited in *ibid.*, 44.

which time the volume of POWs in the British camps had reached its highest level, complaints were still being made by Ministers in Parliament that too many German and Jewish émigré personnel were involved in the screening and general re-education processes.<sup>31</sup> The main concern was that, since the ideological backgrounds of émigrés often conflicted sharply with those of the prisoners, interviews were conducted in which a great many ‘unsuitable’ questions were being asked, and where truthfulness and honesty were ‘at a discount’ when it came to recording prisoners’ responses.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, it was an unsatisfactory situation that should never have arisen, since it was a case of the ‘victim’, the Jewish émigré, being called upon to judge the ‘criminal’, the POW.

According to Henry Faulk, an officer in the Intelligence Corps who was later seconded by the War Office to the PWE and given the task of organising the work of re-education in the POW camps after the war, biased attitudes towards the prisoners were not the preserve of a few German émigrés: they permeated the entire network of personnel that dealt with prisoners of war, as they did British society in general. He observed that, during the war and for a period beyond it, the German soldier, in particular, was seen as the embodiment of a national stereotype – the Nazi, a term that became synonymous with everything that was morally evil. There was little understanding of the political backgrounds of the POWs, and even less of the psychological impact that living under National Socialism would have had on them. Moreover, for some time the War Office departments concerned with POWs and the British military staff responsible for implementing the various stages of re-education remained unconvinced of its value. While the war continued they were sensitive to any activity that might prejudice the position of British POWs held by the Germans,

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<sup>31</sup> Hansard HOC, 12 October 1946, cols. 1474-5. As of the 9 July 1946, 80 of the 222 lectures involved in the re-education of POWs in the UK were conducted by German émigrés.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

and for approximately six months after the war, while re-education was being established in the camps, they resented the considerable burden that the programme added to an already onerous administrative task.

Indeed, military staff and particularly the camp commandants regarded the administration of prisoners of war as being a military matter, and they therefore considered the introduction of politics into the camps as an unrealistic intrusion into their domain. A major concern was that the classification and segregation of the prisoners for the purpose of political indoctrination would ultimately be disruptive. This was because, for some commandants, the establishment of a 'good camp' depended not upon the political classification of its inmates but rather on the successful maintenance of order and discipline within the camp. Given the shortage of British military staff, heavy reliance had to be placed on self-administration by the prisoners. In such instances, the prisoners themselves chose nominees to represent their interests to a higher authority, the '*Lagerführer*', or camp leader, who had been appointed either by the POWs or the British camp commandant, to whom he would report on matters of concern. Those chosen for this role were, in most cases, senior NCOs in the German military who were already regarded as authority figures by most of the inmates and, as such, they proved on the whole to be effective in maintaining camp discipline. The problem with this system, however, was that the *Lagerführer* was almost always an ardent National Socialist and as such naturally recommended prisoners with the same political outlook to work under him.<sup>33</sup> As a result, a Nazi ethos was often established in the camps, which was overlooked by British staff who did not differentiate between 'black', 'grey' or 'white' POWs – they were all Nazis anyway. Hence the British personnel regarded inmates who resisted the Nazi-style

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<sup>33</sup> LAC RG25/2784 621-LD-40, Prisoner of War Interrogation Service (Home) - PWIS(H) - report on 'Cleaning up of a Base Camp', 7 November 1944.

authority of the appointed camp leader, not as being either politically reliable or anti-Nazi in attitude, but rather as trouble-makers who threatened camp discipline.<sup>34</sup> The result was that 'unofficial' disciplinary measures against the anti-Nazi element could be carried out by the hard-core Nazi fanatics within the camp, the 'hundred and fifty percenters' as they became known. Indeed, a new phenomenon developed which generated an atmosphere of fear and suspicion among the inmates akin to that which had existed in Nazi Germany: the 'Rollkommando' – an unofficial, self-appointed, vigilante group whose power to impose control within the camp could be considerable.<sup>35</sup> In March 1945 an article in the *Statesman and Nation* brought this Nazi predominance in the camps to the public's attention:

Energetic young Nazis with the habit of domination quickly form a caucus and get one of their members elected; they soon have a Nazi cell in charge of the sports, entertainments, library, parades, Nazi festivals such as Hitler's birthday, cooking, sanitation, etc.. Only German wireless stations may be listened to; all mails pass through Nazi censorship. An elaborate blackmail goes on; dossiers are composed against non-Nazis, who are told that they or their families will suffer in Germany after the war. At least one anti- or non-Nazi has been killed and four wounded; there may be many more unknown victims.<sup>36</sup>

During the months that followed it became apparent that Nazi vigilantism was a significant problem which had, indeed, resulted in the death of more than one German prisoner in the UK. For example, the murder of Gerhardt Rettig at a POW camp in Sheffield was reported in *The Times* in August 1945.<sup>37</sup> He had been beaten to death by four fellow inmates for allegedly betraying a plan for a tunnel escape from the camp. Also, between July and October 1945 the British press chronicled the military court case of eight German NCOs who stood accused of beating, then hanging, Sergeant-

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<sup>34</sup> Henry Faulk, *Group Captives*, 30.

<sup>35</sup> Roderick DeNorman, *For Führer and Fatherland: SS Murder and Mayhem in Wartime Britain* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1996), 67-68.

<sup>36</sup> LAC RG25/3400 621-LD-40C, article from the *Statesman and Nation*, 31 March 1945.

<sup>37</sup> *The Times*, 10 August 1945.

Major Wolfgang Rosterg.<sup>38</sup> It was revealed that after a mock trial in Comrie camp, Perthshire, on 23 December 1944, Rosterg had been found guilty by the 'Rollkommando' of treason on a charge of having been in touch with resistance groups in France. Eventually five inmates were accused and hanged at Pentonville Prison for Rosterg's murder. However, it had been a difficult case, as witnesses to the crime had been reluctant to come forward. One POW giving evidence told the court that it was very dangerous to be an anti-Nazi in the camp and that he himself had written a cheque for 25,000 marks on Hitler's birthday so that the others would think that he was a Nazi.<sup>39</sup>

This situation was particularly worrying for officials involved in the re-education programme, who were reportedly astonished by the 'sink of iniquity' that they uncovered in the camps, and they reacted by setting in motion 'clean-up' operations in all instances where a 'black' POW element clearly dominated.<sup>40</sup> This involved identifying and weeding out, or segregating, such individuals and transferring small groups of 'thoroughly dependable "whites" ' into the camps, where they would be placed in all the important positions, such as camp leader, deputy camp leader, camp doctor etc.<sup>41</sup> The aim of this intervention was to decrease Nazi sympathies among the other inmates and to bring some degree of sanity, as well as a corresponding relaxation, to the general atmosphere of the camps, which would be more conducive to the teaching and acceptance of democratic ideas. And, according to an official report, the clean-up effort met with some success. Although the method used to measure changes in attitude is unclear, the report claimed, for example, that in at least

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<sup>38</sup> The events surrounding Rosterg's murder and the subsequent court case is the subject of Roderick DeNorman's book, *For Führer and Fatherland*.

<sup>39</sup> *The Times*, 28 August 1945.

<sup>40</sup> LAC RG25/2784 621-LD-40, 'Cleaning-up of a Base Camp', 7 November 1944.

<sup>41</sup> LAC RG25/2784 621-LD-40, letter from the Canadian Legation to the Allied Governments, London, to Department of External Affairs, Ottawa, 6 December 1944.

one British camp, the operation had resulted in an estimated decrease in Nazi sympathies among the inmates from eighty-five per cent to forty per cent in only two days.<sup>42</sup> This was an impressive statistic. However, in reality the 'clean-up' was not as thoroughgoing as the re-educators had hoped, simply because there were never enough 'whites' to fill all of the administrative posts of every POW camp in Britain and, therefore, too few activists to spread awareness and encourage the adoption of a new democratic ethos.<sup>43</sup>

In Canada the problem was even more acute, which posed a worrying threat to the re-education programme in the UK since the 33,400 POWs held there were due to be transported to Britain between February 1946 and February 1947 for labour purposes. The screeners in Canada employed a classification process that placed POWs in categories according to their political colouring, ranging, in painstakingly minute gradations, from 'jet black', 'black', 'wavering black' or 'grey/black', 'dark grey', 'grey', 'light grey' to 'white'.<sup>44</sup> The authorities had to contend with the fanatical Nazi attitudes of around two-thirds of the German POWs in their charge, namely men in their twenties and thirties who had been captured during the early campaigns of the war and who, for the duration of their captivity, stood firmly by their faith in National Socialism and defiant in their loyalty to Hitler. Their fanaticism was reportedly unparalleled among prisoners captured during the later stages of the conflict. Moreover, even months after the war had ended it was alleged that the Canadian camps were 'more intensively Nazi than Germany itself'.<sup>45</sup> This meant that a 'clean-up' operation similar to that being conducted in the UK was not a practical option. It also meant that, despite attempts to co-ordinate the Canadian and British re-

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Henry Faulk, *Group Captives*, 74-75.

<sup>44</sup> LAC RG25/2784 621-LB-40, memorandum of the Department of External Affairs (DEA) regarding terms used in the political categorisation of German POWs in Canada, September 1944.



education efforts, the scope for success in this field was, to say the least, limited in Canada. According to Henry Faulk, re-education in Canada remained intellectual in form and as such affected only the officers.<sup>46</sup> Consequently, the vast majority of 'Canadians' who arrived in the British camps after February 1946 were diagnosed as 'ardent Nazis' by the screeners and were deemed to pose a potential source of 'infection' when allowed to mingle with the POWs already held in the UK.<sup>47</sup>

In addition, the British authorities also had to take into account the disruption that might be caused by the influx into Britain of 123,000 German POWs from the United States during the first half of 1946. In April of that year the POWD reported that the prisoners from the United States were in general 'darkening the political complexion of the camps'.<sup>48</sup> However, the fact was that many of these prisoners harboured resentment towards the British over what they felt had been their unfair treatment. They claimed that they had been told by their camp commandants in the United States that they were going home to Germany, when in reality they had been earmarked for involuntary labour in Britain.<sup>49</sup> Their bitterness, unlike that of the 'Canadians', was, therefore, not necessarily political, nor was it evidence that they remained National Socialist in outlook. It was, rather, a symptom of their abject disappointment.

Nevertheless, despite their low morale, there were signs that the POWs arriving from the US had been exposed to some form of re-education, although the British re-education authorities were not sure of its exact nature. In fact, until the spring of 1945, the re-education programme in America, known officially as the Special Projects Division (SPD), had only been a half-hearted affair. Until then, as mentioned earlier,

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<sup>46</sup> Henry Faulk, *Group Captives*, 179.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> For a fuller discussion of this problem, see Chapter Four, 112 ff.

the SPD had sought to avoid blatant defiance of that part of the Geneva Convention which forbade indoctrination. The potential threat to Allied captives in German hands also weighed heavily on the minds of War Department officials. Moreover, there was a general assumption that the POWs would in any case, out of conviction or sheer pride, resist any attempt to modify their political beliefs. As a consequence the Americans did not develop a well-thought-out plan for re-education until after VE Day, when the SPD adopted a more proactive approach to the subject, launching, for example, a series of 'crash courses' in democracy for the most politically reliable prisoners. This led to the swift repatriation of 25,000 'graduates' of these courses. However, America's overall strategy for re-educating German POWs did not differ significantly from Canada's. According to Ron Robin, the American educators '...consciously ignored the rank and file. Knowingly, and not by accident, they chose to re-create the familiar milieu of the American college campus, and to focus most of their attention on a marginal and numerically insignificant intellectual subculture within the camps'.<sup>50</sup>

Indeed, there was little on offer in the US re-education programme that had any meaning to the average prisoner of war: it appears that his lesson in democracy was of a far more practical nature. Following a series of visits to German POW camps in the United States in November 1944, officials of the Canadian Department of External Affairs reported that re-education was being conducted there not by the commonly accepted technique of direct instruction but by causing the prisoners of war to live, work, play and be entertained in surroundings and under conditions all based on democratic principles.<sup>51</sup> The whole structure of the camps rested, it was claimed, on a

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<sup>50</sup> Ron Robin, *The Barbed-Wire College: Re-educating German POWs in the United States During World War II* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), 10.

<sup>51</sup> LAC RG25/2784 621-LD-40, 'Report on Visit to German Prisoner of War Camps in the United States from November 6-11, 1944', Department of External Affairs, Ottawa, 25 November 1944.

'liberalised penology' in which the importance of freedom of speech, of thought and much more was paramount, along with 'a touch of kindness'.<sup>52</sup> It also depended on weeding out 'abnormals', by which were meant not only 'violent and evangelical Nazis' but also 'vociferous anti-Nazis, homosexuals, and plain "no goods" '.<sup>53</sup> While some POWs might have recognised the contradiction between America's commitment to democracy and freedom and her irrational ideas about segregation, which, it should be remembered, also applied to her own population as well as to German prisoners, the majority simply appreciated the good treatment and level of material comfort that was afforded them in the US camps. As a former 'American' POW wrote in his memoirs: 'If we were spoilt, beyond our merits, with excellent and abundant food, we were likewise "spoilt" by most respectful, almost subservient treatment.'<sup>54</sup> It is not surprising, then, that their positive experiences in America coloured the POWs' ideas about democracy. When they were unexpectedly shipped to Britain, instead of going home, these ideas were shattered, to be replaced by a hardened attitude to and a renewed distrust of democracy, which at times seemed as futile as National Socialism. Such sentiments were expressed by one prisoner to a British interrogation officer in May 1946:

Under National Socialism I was told to believe all that I was told. I was promised lots of things but most of the promises were never kept. But in America I was promised that I was on my way back to Germany. That promise was also broken. How do you expect me to believe anything at all?<sup>55</sup>

An equally cynical view of democracy was harboured by some of the 79,000 German prisoners shipped across the Channel to Britain between March and August

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Cited in Matthias Reiss, 'Bronzed Bodies behind Barbed Wire: Masculinity and the Treatment of German Prisoners of War in the United States during World War II', in *Journal of Military History*, vol.69, no.2, April 2005, 475-504.

<sup>55</sup> Camp report, May 1946, cited in Henry Faulk, *Group Captives*, 177.

1946 from the British-run POW camps in Belgium. Unlike the 'Americans' however, the attitude of these prisoners towards their captors had been soured by the poor material conditions they had experienced on the Continent, where malnutrition, exposure and disease resulted in the deaths of hundreds of POWs. No doubt they questioned the defensibility of a political system that claimed the moral high ground while treating prisoners of war in this way, and would have regarded this mistreatment as a crime against humanity which placed its victims on the same footing as the victims of the concentration camps. The failure of the Geneva Convention to protect them only offered prisoners further proof of the hypocrisy of their captors and led many to the conclusion that democracy was not synonymous with humanity and justice. Formal re-education, consequently, was to them nothing more than propaganda.

German prisoners of war held in the UK did not, therefore, constitute a homogeneous group of men who had undergone the same experiences and who held the same attitudes towards captivity or their captors and, as a result of these disparities, re-education could not be applied to all uniformly. This complicated the entire task of re-education and made it all the more difficult to reach a reliable conclusion as to whether the programme actually brought about the intended change of heart among the prisoners, or whether other factors played a more important role. An assessment of the British programme was produced in 1979 by Henry Faulk.<sup>56</sup> In considerable and somewhat complex detail, he reached the conclusion that a chronological analysis of re-education's progress largely reflected the pattern of the changing psychological state of the prisoners, and that the most important factor

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<sup>56</sup> Faulk's 1979 book, *Group Captives*, is an abridged version of his contribution to the German Maschke Commission's official history of German POWs during the Second World War (Erich Maschke (ed.), *Zur Geschichte der deutschen Kriegsgefangenen des Zweiten Weltkrieges* (Munich, 1962-1974), entitled *German Prisoners of War in the UK – Re-education*). (See Chapter Two, fn. 30).

affecting the mental state of the POW was his need to identify with the attitudes and 'norms' of the group of which he felt a part. From a sociological perspective the camp, therefore, became the 'total institution' in which a group ethos was established.<sup>57</sup> This, according to Faulk, is explained by the fact that in Great Britain there were never 'white', 'grey' or 'black' camps as such, in the sense that all inmates of one camp were untainted by Nazi attitudes while all the inmates of another were steeped in Nazi ideology. As already mentioned, all camps consisted of a small 'white' element and a small 'black' element, which rarely made up more than twenty per cent of the camp total between them, and approximately eighty per cent 'greys'. Nevertheless, both re-education officials and POWs themselves spoke of 'white', 'grey' and 'black' camps, referring to the prevalent political climate in specific camps. This often reflected the attitudes of a small element, which was both active and dominant, rather than the views of the majority of inmates. Accordingly, a well-balanced 'white' camp leadership had to be established before any positive change in group-attitudes could occur:

The best of these 'whites' were men whose humanity, integrity and capabilities were of a quality to overcome opposition and to command respect, trust and a focal social influence in the community. In addition to their qualities of personality they displayed clearly group attitudes which, simple, direct and unequivocal, ensured the spread of the social awareness that defined the 'tone' of the camp. The tone then set the norms of conformity.<sup>58</sup>

However, the situation was a complex one because conformity to the established group 'norm' did not necessarily reflect individual attitudes. These depended on a variety of factors, ranging from the depth of a prisoner's personal identification with National Socialism, his age, length of time spent in captivity, and, as already mentioned, his experiences since capture, and in most cases these were directly linked

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<sup>57</sup> This concept is also explored by Barrington Moore in *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt* (London: Macmillan, 1979).

<sup>58</sup> Henry Faulk, *Group Captives*, 67.

to one another. For example, although there were variations, age was found to be the most important of the factors determining attitudes towards National Socialism. POWs between the ages of seventeen and twenty-six were considered to be most deeply imbued with the Nazi philosophy: they had grown up in a world where Hitler, National Socialism as a political system, and their sense of national identity were one and the same. Not surprisingly, after the German collapse these young prisoners reacted with belligerent defiance. Everything that they believed in and that had given meaning to their lives had suddenly vanished. They felt empty and betrayed and, therefore, rejected any hint of political indoctrination, which they regarded with contempt. Indeed, the latter half of 1945 was a period of mental confusion for the majority of prisoners: they had to adjust themselves psychologically to defeat as well as to the human catastrophe which the Nazis had brought down on Europe, in which they had all played a part. In addition, they had to cope with feelings of despair about the fate and well-being of loved ones at home in Germany. By the end of 1946, however, there was a general improvement in POWs' morale and a mellowing of attitudes towards their captors. This was mainly the result of work and contact with civilians outside the prison camp, particularly after the removal of the fraternisation ban in December of that year which, according to Faulk, encouraged the development of human empathy on both sides and helped make the prisoners feel as though they were part of the 'real world' again.<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, despite this progress, delays in the repatriation process and the influx of resentful German POWs from America and Belgium soon upset the more favourable atmosphere and lighter 'tone' that had begun to develop in the camps.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 171.

The Prisoner of War Department's re-education agenda had been distributed, in pamphlet form, to all camp commandants in December 1945. It declared its ultimate goals as being:

1. To eradicate from the minds of the prisoners belief in the military tradition and the National Socialist ideology, of which the basis is that might is right and that the necessity of the state knows no law.
2. To impart to the prisoners an accurate understanding and a just appreciation of the principles of democratic government and their implications for the conduct of men and nations; in particular, to encourage the application of democratic principles to German conditions as a basis for the peaceful re-absorption of Germany into the European Community, which is a vital British interest.
3. To present the British Commonwealth of Nations as an example of a democratic community in action, while avoiding the projection of Britain as a model to be slavishly copied.
4. To remove German misconception about European history of the last 50 years and especially about the origin, conduct and results of the two world wars.<sup>60</sup>

However, British re-education officials realised that a radical change in the world-view of POWs through a formal programme of instruction in democracy, as the pamphlet implied, was out of the question. Indeed, they understood what their counterparts in the US and Canada seemingly failed to appreciate, which was that such instruction would only appeal to an educated minority and could not possibly take into account the many variables in the mental outlook of the prisoners. The overriding aim of Henry Faulk and his team was thus to undermine the existing group conformity by encouraging prisoners to debate and express opinions through the relaxed informality of 'barrack-room gossip, barrack-room discussion and barrack-room argument', which would inconspicuously produce important behavioural, as opposed to ideological, changes in them.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> POWD pamphlet, October 1945, cited in Henry Faulk, *Group Captives*, 58.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

This is not, however, to suggest that the British system lacked structure and organisation. On the contrary, all activities under the re-education programme were designed to stimulate discussion of this kind, although the most effective, according to Faulk, was reading. Because suspicion of the motives behind all written material was endemic, it was considered important to give prisoners the freedom to choose from a variety of books, pamphlets, magazines and newspapers, not all of which had to reflect western-democratic principles. Moreover, the weekly newspaper produced by POWD, *Die Wochenpost*, was particularly appreciated by the prisoners because, under strict editorial guidelines, it provided straight news items from Germany rather than propaganda and avoided the highly intellectualised contents of the POW newspapers in America. Indeed, at least two pages in each issue were devoted to the concerns of the rank and file, and included articles on sport, camp news and a 'search corner' for those seeking lost comrades. For other forms of communication the British re-education staff provided the materials and administration but allowed the POWs to take over from there. They would organise camp radio programmes, drama productions, musical entertainment and sport, none of which displayed the familiar trappings of re-education but which, nevertheless, provided the necessary spur to discussion.

In some respects, therefore, Britain's style of re-education was not unlike that of the United States. It encouraged an appreciation of certain liberties and freedoms that many of the prisoners, particularly the young, had never before experienced. And, so that it should have an effect on all concerned, Britain's programme aimed to achieve this as inconspicuously as possible. Yet, in one important way, the re-education of German POWs in Britain was far more sophisticated than it was in America: it was aimed at all prisoners and acknowledged the special needs of certain elements among



them. For example, the British initiated a training centre for prisoner-candidates of 'intelligence, personality and activity', who had demonstrated to officials a distinct 'whiteness' or at least 'near whiteness' in their political outlook.<sup>62</sup> This training centre - Camp 300 at Wilton Park, Beaconsfield, which was run by Heinz Koeppler - was the most costly single item in the POWD budget, yet it dealt with only one per cent of the total number of POWs in the UK and eight per cent of those graded 'white'.<sup>63</sup> It opened officially in January 1946, and by the time its use as a POW camp came to an end, in June 1948, it had put on fifteen courses for just over 4,000 prisoners as well as 500 civilians from Germany.<sup>64</sup> Those selected, who were mostly (seventy-five per cent) educated professionals and businessmen of an average age of twenty-six, attended courses in politics, economics, and social and juridical subjects which were both international in scope and taught in an atmosphere of tolerance and objectivity. On the whole, the students appeared to respond positively to the six-week-long training, which, according to Faulk, made them feel that they had 'experienced a bit of democracy' and were part of the world again.<sup>65</sup> And, despite its dismissal by some of the 'black' prisoners as a 'Dream Palace' and a breeding place for communists who were seeking early repatriation, Wilton Park gained a high international reputation for its achievements in the dissemination of democratic ideas.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, unlike students who had attended comparable 'crash courses' in democracy in the US, the 'graduates' of Wilton Park were not repatriated but were sent back to the camps

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>63</sup> Heinz Koeppler was a German Jewish émigré. He had been a historian at Magdalen College, Oxford, and worked for the Political Intelligence Department of the Foreign Office. He continued to run Wilton Park Training Centre until his retirement in 1977.

<sup>64</sup> Richard Mayne, *In Victory, Magnanimity, in Peace, Goodwill: The History of Wilton Park* (Whitehall Histories: Foreign and Commonwealth Office Publications, 2003). Wilton Park is still actively carrying out its role as a forum for democracy building and post-war reconciliation. Since 1948, academics, experts in various fields, and business and media professionals from countries all over the world have been invited to attend courses which continue to encourage frank, searching and off-the-record debate.

<sup>65</sup> Henry Faulk, *Group Captives*, 91.

<sup>66</sup> Michael Balfour, 'In Retrospect: Britain's Policy of Re-education', 150.

where, it was hoped, they would take on leadership roles among the inmates and bring about a positive change of atmosphere

At the other end of the spectrum, POWD also established a youth camp to address the lack of 'social awareness' among young 'black' prisoners. Between its opening in June 1946 and disbandment in June 1948, the camp housed a total of 7,000 young men between the ages of seventeen and twenty-six who, officials recognised, 'would have nothing to do with re-education, because of defiance, a faithful unto-death attitude, resentment, stubbornness, despair or apathy'.<sup>67</sup> The camp, which was situated near Cambridge, functioned like all working camps, with the exception that all of its inmates spent one day per week attending classes. Here, however, lessons not only had to allow for the uneven educational level of the prisoners, but they also had to take into account the fact that 'preaching' democracy would be viewed by these POWs as a moral assault. Emphasis was therefore placed on the notion of citizenship: the aim was to teach them to be 'decent human beings' through a practical, fourteen-week course which included films, visits to industrial, administrative and cultural institutions, as well as lectures and many hours of group discussion.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, in order to improve the chances of producing a change of attitude, the instructors were all democratically inclined German POWs.

Britain's re-education effort appears, therefore, to have been significantly more attuned to the mission at hand than do those of Canada and the United States. Yet, could it be considered to have been successful? Certainly, there is evidence that some prisoners came to question their initial beliefs, as is shown by the letters they wrote upon their repatriation. According to one inmate of the Youth Camp:

...Democracy meant for us lots of talk and no action. Now  
that we've left the camp, we want to draw up an honest

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<sup>67</sup> Henry Faulk, *Group Captives*, 95-109.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

balance-sheet. We have learnt that there must be tolerance. On the whole we are convinced that a real democracy is an ideal that we shall try to achieve at home...How shall we fare at home? Who knows? Perhaps we shall go under in a whirlpool of demoralisation. Perhaps however we shall realise our wish to achieve a new German future.<sup>69</sup>

However, Faulk concluded that this did not necessarily signify a fundamental conversion to democracy and pointed out that, despite the re-education programme, the proportion of prisoners who were categorised as 'white' did not actually rise. To be specific, the percentage calculated for the 'white', 'grey' and 'black' categories remained constant throughout the period. This may explain why, upon their repatriation, POWs were not assigned any significant role in the political transformation of German society. Indeed, even the 'whites', who were regarded as the keystone of Britain's re-education experiment and who were given priority repatriation in the hope that they would influence social attitudes in Germany, 'vanished without a trace' on their return home.<sup>70</sup> Nor is there any evidence to suggest that American re-education officials were able to secure pivotal positions in government for their 'crash course' graduates.<sup>71</sup> In Germany, the need, which would remain for some time, was for technical and organisational ability rather than political enlightenment. It appears, then, that the re-education of the POWs had little effect on the near-term transformation of German political culture. Indeed, it has since been argued that any immediate change in political attitudes was more likely to have been brought about by a number of external factors which were quite unrelated to the re-education programme itself.

Chief among these external factors was, it has been argued, the shocking realisation with which ex-POWs were confronted on their return home: Germany was

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 106-7.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>71</sup> Ron Robin, *Barbed Wire College*, 176.

utterly destroyed, both physically and psychologically.<sup>72</sup> This was apparent to Captain Robert Kunzig, the executive officer in charge of the United States re-education programme, who accompanied the first ship-load of 'graduates' on their journey home:

As our train approached the border, the Saar region, I was conscious of a tenseness in the men. I could see it in their eyes. They crowded to the doors for the first glimpse. Then they saw. They saw, and they'll remember for all time. Ruin, desolation, and destruction were framed in that open door. The only sound was the lonely shriek of the engine far ahead.

Standing next to me, Hans...watched and waited. His home was in the next little town on a small side street near the tracks. We rounded a bend, and I heard him gasp. I knew the reason. His home wasn't there. Nothing but mounds of rubble piled high.<sup>73</sup>

Indeed, defeat had been total and overwhelming, reinforced and exacerbated by the almost total disruption of collective existence. Returning to a world of homelessness and starvation, any illusions the prisoners might still have harboured about the invincibility of the Third Reich would have been shattered and they would have been swept along by the same current of events that affected the remaining civilian population of Germany. According to Ron Robin, 'physical destruction, not a new enlightenment had obliterated the complex social conditions and ideological values that had nurtured National Socialism'.<sup>74</sup>

However, the destruction of one ideology did not necessarily lead immediately to the adoption of another. And, although many commentators attribute Germany's political rehabilitation, which, in West Germany, eventually resulted in support for the establishment of the new democratic government, to her rapid economic recovery in the decade after the war, this again cannot be taken as firm evidence that political attitudes had undergone a fundamental transformation. When discussing the impact of

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<sup>72</sup> This line of argument is, for example, put forward in Nicholas Pronay, 'To Stamp Out the Whole Tradition...', 6.

<sup>73</sup> Robert L. Kunzig, cited in Ron Robin, *Barbed Wire College*, 176.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

economic change on political attitudes in West Germany, Mary Fulbrook concludes that:

Sheer pragmatism and concern for personal survival and material well-being brought many West Germans to support the political system which appeared to have initiated, facilitated and sustained this recovery. It was not a principled commitment to democracy as such: but the economic take-off bought valuable time in which the political system could be established.<sup>75</sup>

In other words, in the absence of 'principled commitment' it was only a 'fair-weather' democracy which was established in Germany. That is, of course, not a unique phenomenon and one needs only to look at Germany's recent past, and indeed that of Britain, in the inter-war period to understand the important relationship between the economic and political life of a nation. In Germany, poverty, distress and unemployment were essential ingredients in the downfall of the Weimar Republic and in the rise of National Socialism, just as the easing of these economic problems after 1933 resulted in popular approval for many of the NSDAP's policies.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, that approval does not necessarily indicate a 'principled commitment' to National Socialism. What it does show is that human beings are typically, although not always, concerned with the immediate conditions of their lives and tend to support the political system that promises to ameliorate them. Moreover, while this is again no revelation, it is important to consider the ambivalent relationship between politics and people when assessing the ultimate value of re-education.

Faulk, in his 1970s assessment of Britain's POW re-education programme, claimed that the British staff implementing it in the POW camps assumed that National Socialism meant the same thing for the POWs as it did for the Allies, namely

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<sup>75</sup> Mary Fulbrook, *History of Germany 1918-2000: The Divided Nation* (London: Blackwell, 2002), 297.

<sup>76</sup> R.B. McCallum, *Public Opinion and the Last Peace* (London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1944), 14.

that it was a political system based on domination, militarism, conquest, oppression, persecution and sadistic cruelty. They did not seem to understand that in reality the prisoners valued National Socialism above all for its social and economic achievements, laying twice as much stress on the economic stability, social welfare and the elimination of class conflict it was said to have produced as on national aggrandisement.<sup>77</sup> This failure of understanding was no sound basis for success. Indeed, how could new political sympathies be encouraged among the prisoners when the 'teachers' themselves had no realistic idea of what they were trying to replace?

However, the temptation to dismiss Britain's POW re-education policy as a combination of naivety and superficiality should be avoided, since such an assessment would be superficial in itself. For example, is it not possible that there was a valid reason for *not* acknowledging the reasons for which prisoners valued National Socialism? Certainly, the apparent absence of any effort to enlighten, or even 're-educate', officials as to the various motivating factors which lay behind support for the Nazi regime indicates that to provide such information might have been counter-productive. Moreover, would not any such recognition have made the high-minded objectives of re-education appear superfluous anyway, and not worth pursuing? Or, was the blinkered, one-dimensional attitude toward re-education, which represented it as a policy of political conversion, a screen behind which existed a more intricate agenda?

Certainly, from an early stage in the planning process of re-education the government would have been aware of the many arguments put forward by intellectuals and politicians who felt that the policy was not in fact necessary. One of these was the academic and historian E.H. Carr, who, in his 1942 book, *Conditions of*

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<sup>77</sup> Henry Faulk, *Group Captives*, 22.

*Peace*, rejected outright the idea of German 'wickedness' espoused by individuals such as Robert Vansittart.<sup>78</sup> Instead Carr predicted that the military defeat of Germany would be accompanied by a kind of spiritual collapse and that, given the right conditions, this would be followed by spiritual regeneration. He, along with others, such as T.H. Marshall, the Foreign Research Press Service's (FRPS) adviser on Germany, believed that specifically German democratic forces should be allowed to take over the mantle of 'educator' in the post-war environment. Germany, Marshall remarked, should not become a kindergarten in which the British taught 'a body of approved and accepted doctrines'.<sup>79</sup> On the contrary, re-education, he said, 'must be through action and experience, not through schooling'.<sup>80</sup> The German Social Democratic Party (SPD), which had its official headquarters in London between 1941 and the end of 1945, was acknowledged by Carr and Marshall as possessing the necessary credentials. And, indeed, from the perspective of 1945, there appeared to be good reason to recognise the merits of this argument: the SPD had accepted that the German people would require an extensive education in liberal democratic values after Hitler's defeat; throughout its exile the Party had maintained its position as the antithesis to Nazism and the true representative of the 'good' Germany, and, moreover, considering the SPD's large membership before 1933, it was more than likely that, given free conditions, Germany would have been able to construct its own political future along social democratic lines. These things considered, in view of Britain's considerable worldwide responsibilities after the war, allowing Germany to 're-educate' herself might have been a more rational approach for the government to adopt.

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<sup>78</sup> E.H. Carr, *Conditions of Peace* (London: Macmillan, 1942), 224.

<sup>79</sup> TNA: PRO FO371/39 500, 13 July 1942.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

Also in 1942, the left-wing publisher and author Victor Gollancz issued a short text in response to Vansittart's *Black Record*, entitled *Shall Our Children Live Or Die?*<sup>81</sup> He condemned the Germanophobia that pervaded public discourse and, referring to the popularity of Vansittartism, observed that the majority of those who read *Black Record* had 'no means whatever of checking Vansittart's statements. People', said Gollancz, 'for the most part believe what they read, provided they are in the emotional condition which makes them want to believe it.'<sup>82</sup> Indeed, Gollancz understood precisely the method of achieving this effect – the selection of some facts and the suppression of others in order to prove a hypothesis – and that it could allow the reading of any country's history with prejudice. Yet when re-education was being developed as a policy, Foreign Office officials were also taking account of the various factors that had led to war, which were quite unconnected with the idea of a specific German 'mentality'. Professor Dodds of the Foreign Office Research Department (FORD), for example, examined the failure of democracy in Germany after 1918. Commenting on the 'pariah' status imposed on that country by the Treaty of Versailles, and the economic effects of inflation and mass unemployment, which weakened democratic forces, he concluded:

There is nothing in the history of these years (1918-1933) which compels us to believe that Germans are by nature incapable of self-government and will permanently remain so. It is true that their development after 1848 and 1918 had been a bad preparation for self-government but the specific breakdown of German democracy is traceable to a particular constellation of contemporary political, economic, social and cultural factors.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Victor Gollancz, *Shall Our Children Live Or Die?: A Reply to Lord Vansittart on The German Problem* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1942).

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>83</sup> Professor Dodds, cited in Kurt Jurgensen, 'British Occupation Policy after 1945 and the Problem of Re-educating Germany', in *History*, 1983:68, 225-244.



Even the 'failure of Weimar' argument could be challenged by emphasising the fact that the Weimar Constitution had been the most democratic in existence. Contemporary commentators like Gollancz went so far as to suggest that the British post-war domestic planners could take example from a system which, in theory at least, offered a model system of social security and education, an enviable medical service and vast improvements in housing. That this constitution had been conceived in Germany only two decades earlier made it appear absurd to some critics that the principles of liberty and humanity which it had embodied were now an anathema to the German people. Robert Birley, for example, who became the most successful and highly respected education adviser to Germany, was in no doubt that in that country there existed 'admirable humanist traditions which could guide her into the future'.<sup>84</sup>

For some critics the problem with re-education was that it was based on an assumption of Germany's moral inferiority. In 1942 FRPS pointed out that while Germany did bear the heaviest load of guilt of all European countries with regard to human suffering, this should not divert attention from the atrocities committed by non-Germans during the war. Indeed, the moral balance-sheet had become complicated and featured countries on both sides of the conflict: rather than 'a sharp gradation into sheep and goats' argued FRPS, there instead existed 'an elaborate and complicated gradation from those who most completely agree with us as to the basic principles on which civilisation must be founded to those who are avowed enemies of those principles'.<sup>85</sup> Consequently, there was ready acceptance by certain members of the Foreign Office that Britain's determination to treat Germany as an exception by

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<sup>84</sup> *The Times*, 8 May 1945, Robert Birley in a Letter to the Editor.

<sup>85</sup> TNA: PRO FO371/31500, FRPS paper on 'What to do with Germany', 23 July 1942.

subjecting her alone to a policy of re-education was quite unconnected with the country's moral condition.<sup>86</sup>

Without doubt, the architects of re-education were intelligent individuals who would have been unlikely to pursue, until as late as 1948, a complex and costly programme that promised little return. Surely, moreover, they would have been aware of the blatant contradiction in a policy which allowed the teaching of democracy to sit alongside a system of prolonged incarceration not held to fall under the remit of international law, as well as of involuntary, or as some would have it, 'slave' labour? It seems reasonable, therefore, to suggest that the salient arguments voiced by intellectuals, politicians and their advisers against re-education were dismissed because the mission the policy-framers were pursuing had far wider implications for Britain and was not concerned merely with elevating the enemy's political outlook. To understand what these implications were, the re-education of German POWs has to be placed within the broader context of Britain's foreign policy aims both during, and particularly after, the war. This helps to explain the persistence with which the British government continued to cling to the policy despite the realisation that it could claim little success.

Indeed, I would argue that the 'battle for the German mind' that British officials envisaged would take place after the war was not only corrective in its aims, in terms of 'stamping out' National Socialism and the German militarist tradition, but was also preventative: re-education formed an important part of Britain's 'Western Strategy', which was designed to contain the influence of Communism in Europe after the war. In other words, Britain's fear that the Soviet Union would have the dominant political voice in Germany motivated officials to try to forestall this danger, just as Britain's

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

desire to place limits on Russia's unrealistic material claims against Germany had led to the inclusion of a demand for German labour in Britain's reparations proposal. Both policies were discussed and formulated during the course of 1943 and both sought to protect Britain's post-war interests in Europe against the threat of Soviet encroachment.

The parallels between the two policies, in terms alike of their timing, the motivation behind them and their ultimate objectives, are no coincidence. From the outset of World War II there had been suspicions among Britain's Chiefs of Staff and increasingly among Foreign Office officials as to Russia's post-war intentions where Germany was concerned. By 1943, what was clearly emerging in official communications, and was reflected in the development of re-education as a policy, was a Cold War mentality in relation to the Soviet Union. As the Soviet Army moved westward during the course of that year, bringing with it the threat of Soviet ideological infiltration into central Europe, discussions within the British government and the military about the respective positions of Germany and Russia in Europe after the war became more protracted. In July 1944 Field Marshal Alanbrooke expressed the general concern as follows:

We must from now onwards regard Germany in a very different light. Germany is no longer the dominating power in Europe – Russia is...She cannot fail to become the main threat fifteen years from now. Therefore foster Germany, gradually build her up and bring her into a federation of Western Europe.<sup>87</sup>

In particular, the prospect of a 'Sovietised' Germany threatened to pose a huge problem for Britain, due mainly to Germany's geo-strategic position and her potential influence on the European balance of power. A principal objective for Britain was, therefore, to establish the dominant dialogue in Germany – to make her look to the

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<sup>87</sup> Field Marshal Alanbrooke cited in Arthur Bryant, *Triumph in the West 1943-1946* (London: Collins, 1959), 242.

West rather than to the East for political guidance – thereby securing a strong Western bloc as a bulwark against Soviet domination on the Continent.

That re-education should have been considered a vital tool in this process is not surprising. After all, this method had been used to significant effect on the Indian population during the heyday of Imperialism, a comparison upon which Nicholas Pronay places considerable emphasis.<sup>88</sup> And, as mentioned earlier, during the inter-war period Britain had become aware of the uses of ‘education’, or propaganda, in international relations, in terms of reinforcing power status and influence over foreign countries. Consequently, it seems logical that, since the Second World War and the rise of the United States and Russia as superpowers had further weakened Britain’s already fragile status on the world stage, re-education should be regarded as a way of recovering lost ground. Indeed, through re-education Britain would be able to show the world that she was not completely bankrupt in political leadership: it would allow her to demonstrate her role as leader of the new crusade and flag-bearer of the much talked about democratic ‘New Order’ that would sweep across Europe after the war. The philosophical assumption underpinning this policy was, therefore, that ‘he who talks the loudest’ would receive commensurate rewards and Britain was determined that her language should leave no room for doubt, because an uncertain stance at that particular time in her history might have been regarded as inferior to the ideological certainty expressed by others, particularly Russia.

Ultimately, Britain’s re-education policy serves to illustrate a Western tendency to conceive of democracy instrumentally, in terms of the ends that its promotion will achieve rather than the rights that it should embody. Those ends in relation to re-education were, I believe, concerned with exerting influence in a Cold War

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<sup>88</sup> Nicholas Pronay, ‘To Stamp Out a Whole Tradition...’, 11.

environment through the promotion of Western ideas, Western culture, Western prosperity and Western strength, and thus reinforcing state power. For many German prisoners of war, however, the lack of the rights that democracy was supposed to afford them could not go unnoticed: contrary to the terms of the Geneva Convention, which Britain, after June 1945, had declared to be no longer effective, they continued to be held in prison camps as involuntary workers for up to three and a half years after the war in Europe had ended.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Repatriation

The last 546 German POWs held in the United Kingdom were returned to their homeland on 12 July 1948 to the tune of 'Lili Marlene'.<sup>1</sup> It was an event which marked the end of a slow, but continuous, process of repatriation that had begun years earlier and upon which much critical attention had been focussed by politicians, public officials and British society in general. This criticism was mainly directed at the government's apparent determination, until late 1946, to avoid making any commitment regarding the return of the prisoners, despite the Geneva Convention's requirement that they should be repatriated as soon as possible after the conclusion of peace; hence the question was one of moral concern with important legal implications. Yet, as was the case with other policies affecting German POWs, namely 'labour reparations' and 're-education', the terms of Unconditional Surrender allowed the government room for manoeuvre with regard to the treatment of prisoners, and any right the latter might seek to claim to be sent home immediately after the war was considered by officials to be far less important than the needs of post-war Britain. Consequently, it was not until the latter half of 1946 that the Labour government, forced to respond by the humanitarian outcry of a liberal-minded public, made any attempt to draw up a schedule for repatriation. With almost 400,000 German POWs to send home, and more still entering the country from America, there were difficult, and yet important, questions that needed to be addressed. The problem

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<sup>1</sup> Johannes-Dieter Steinert, 'British Recruitment of German Labour, 1945-50', in Panikos Panayi (ed.), *Germans in Britain since 1500* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1996), 173.

was that the government did not regard the retention of German prisoners in Great Britain as solely a manpower matter: it was one, as we have seen, that affected national and foreign policy in general.<sup>2</sup> That being so, how could it formulate a proposal for repatriation which, on the one hand, would satisfy public demand, both in Germany and Great Britain, for the prisoners' release, whilst, on the other, enabling Britain to attain foreign policy as well as her economic objectives? Furthermore, it was necessary to give careful consideration to the question of which POWs should be sent home first, since this would also be likely to have significant implications for Germany as well as Britain after the war. This chapter, therefore, considers the many competing interests that featured not only in the repatriation debate that took place in Britain between 1945 and April 1947, when the Allied governments finally reached an agreement at the Moscow Conference of Foreign Ministers that all German prisoners would be discharged by 31 December 1948, but also in the decisions that were taken by officials in response to the problems that arose in this connection.<sup>3</sup>

It was not until almost a year after hostilities had ended in Europe that the subject of repatriation became a matter of official and public concern in Britain. This contrasted sharply with the situation after the First World War, when Churchill ensured that all German POWs held in Britain were repatriated before the signing of the Versailles Peace Treaty. He justified this course on practical grounds: the prisoners were costing the country £90,000 a day to keep and they could even be sent home on the very trains that were returning British troops from the Continent, which offered a distinct saving in expenditure.<sup>4</sup> However, Churchill was also acutely aware of Britain's legal obligation to return the prisoners after the end of hostilities and, with

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<sup>2</sup> Hansard HOC, 8 July 1946.

<sup>3</sup> Lothar Kettenacker, 'The Germans after 1945', Panikos Panayi (ed.), *Germans in Britain since 1500*, 188.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Barry Sullivan, *Thresholds of Peace: Four Hundred Thousand German Prisoners and the People of Great Britain, 1944-1948* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1979), 117.

the support of the British public, he went so far as to urge other, perhaps less willing nations, to abide by the dictates of international law in this respect.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, as far as Britain was concerned in 1919, although Germany had been thoroughly beaten, the sooner that 'normal' relations could be resumed between victor and vanquished states the better for all concerned - a view expressed in Churchill's famous motto of that year, 'In victory magnanimity, in peace goodwill'.<sup>6</sup>

From the perspective of 1945, the past, as the saying goes, was another country. Rather than their benefiting from a restoration of goodwill towards Germany, the German people were castigated as moral lepers who did not deserve anything but the harshest treatment. This reaction was fuelled in large part by the public's realisation of the worst excesses of Nazism following the Allied liberation of the concentration camps. The news was all the more shocking because, until 1945, the BBC had, for a variety of motives, played down the Nazi extermination policies in its war reportage. Listener reactions to broadcasts given in 1942 about German barbarity in Occupied Europe and the Russian Front indicated that atrocity propaganda was generally counter-productive and seemed to lower the morale and fighting spirit of the country. In addition, there was reluctance on the part of the Ministry of Information to publicise atrocities against Jews and it expressed the fear that, far from prompting sympathy among the British public, reports of this kind would instead arouse its latent anti-Semitism.<sup>7</sup> This equivocal attitude was mirrored by BBC controllers' determination to make only indirect references to the subject in their broadcasts – a decision which, according to Sian Nicholas, 'remains a tragic blot on the BBC's

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 117 and 185. Churchill strongly disapproved of Clemenceau's determination to 'keep German slaves' in France for up to two years after 1919.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Sian Nicholas, *The Echo of War: Home Front Propaganda and the Wartime BBC, 1939-45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 160.



wartime record'.<sup>8</sup> As more and more Germans came under Allied control, BBC war correspondents' dispatches did not cast the German people as good or specifically bad: they were to be pitied. Not surprisingly, this almost neutral tone contrasted sharply with what was to follow when, from April 1945, a series of reports from the scenes of the newly discovered Nazi concentration camps were broadcast on the radio and shown in British cinemas. Edward Murrow at Buchenwald and Richard Dimbleby at Belsen described graphically and with quiet horror what was found: 'I pray you to believe what I have said'; 'I have never seen British soldiers so moved to cold fury'.<sup>9</sup> The words and harrowing images were met with shocked disbelief and any pity that might have been felt for the defeated, and particularly German prisoners of war, would almost certainly have evaporated.

Adding to the weight of condemnation brought about by these revelations was the fact that the terms of Unconditional Surrender actually removed certain legal constraints which might have deterred the Allies from applying harsh treatment to the POWs.<sup>10</sup> It was, therefore, the moral certainty of the victor nations as well as their confidence in being 'all right on the letter' as far as the law was concerned, that ensured the relegation of the German people as a whole, including prisoners of war, to outlaw status.<sup>11</sup> One way to reinforce the image of Germany as a nation of social pariahs was through the early introduction by the Allies of rules and regulations designed to isolate her citizens from the 'civilised' world. As a result, Germans would be fenced off by a policy of non-fraternisation, which forbade any contact between

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 163, Edward Murrow and Richard Dimbleby, cited respectively.

<sup>10</sup> Chapter Two of this volume, 'Changing the Status of German Soldiers Captured at the Surrender' explores the issue of legality in detail.

<sup>11</sup> Hansard HOC, 29 July 1946, col. 547; Philip Noel-Baker was referring to the view that the Geneva Convention no longer applied.

them and the populations of Allied countries, including their armed forces, over and above that which was absolutely necessary for the conduct of day-to-day business.

The occupation authorities themselves quickly recognised that the non-fraternisation policy was unworkable and within a few months after the end of hostilities in Europe the Inter-Allied Control Commission for Germany agreed to abandon it altogether in each of the zones.<sup>12</sup> In Great Britain, however, the ban continued for nineteen months after the war. Initially at least, the government considered the denial of any human contact between the prisoners and the British public to be absolutely necessary for a number of reasons. Ironically as it now seems, in view of the deliberate flouting of the Geneva Convention's rules in other respects, officials claimed that it was Britain's responsibility, as holding power, to protect the prisoners from hostility on the part of the public which was bound to be aroused in the atmosphere of 1945. Disciplinary control of the POWs would also be easier without civilian intervention. Moreover, the policy of non-fraternisation offered a way of cold-shouldering German POWs who had played an indisputable role in the catastrophic destruction of Europe: they had behaved despicably and deserved to be shunned by the rest of the world. However, perhaps most important of all was the belief among the decision-makers that non-fraternisation would help to maintain an emotional, as well as physical, distance between the prisoners and the British public and that, as a consequence, little sympathy would be felt for the plight of the POWs. This, in turn, would allow the government to remain largely unchallenged by the civilian population over its decision to retain them as reparations labourers for an indefinite period.

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<sup>12</sup> During the summer of 1945 women in the USA demonstrated against the lifting of the fraternisation ban which, they believed, would serve to encourage the development of romantic relations between the US troops and German women. See Manfred Reichensteiner, *Der Sonderfall: Die Besatzungszeit in Österreich 1945 bis 1955* (Graz: Verlag Styria, 1995), 121.

Throughout 1945 it appeared that the government's predictions had been correct. Indeed, according to one observer, that year proved to be the 'time of the leper' for the German POWs held in Britain.<sup>13</sup> In the first few months of that year, and corresponding with the period when Nazi atrocity stories involving the regime's deliberate starvation policy in the concentration camps were appearing in the media, resentment was understandably shown towards the POWs in relation to the rations granted them by the British government.<sup>14</sup> Incidents such as the prosecution of a local man in Rugby in March 1945 for illegally obtaining food supplies from his local POW camp gave rise to suspicions that prisoners must be over-supplied with food.<sup>15</sup> The anger of a ration-weary British public was vented in a heated House of Commons debate in April and subsequently published in the press. Responding to questions regarding what measures the Minister of War proposed to take in response to a petition of 650 women signatories protesting against excessive rations being issued to German POWs, Sir John Grigg proposed to bring working prisoners' rations 'into line' with those of civilians and non-working prisoners.<sup>16</sup> No doubt the world food shortage went far in prompting this response from the government. However, officials would also have been conscious of a need to ease the public's sense of injustice, particularly in view of the fact that British prisoners returning from their captivity in Germany stated that, but for the contents of parcels from the ICRC, they too would have been allowed to starve.<sup>17</sup> By the end of May 1945 the rations afforded non-working POWs had been reduced from 2,375 to 2,000 calories per day, an amount

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<sup>13</sup> M.B. Sullivan, *Thresholds of Peace*, 86-112. '1945: Time of the Leper' is the title given by Sullivan to his fifth chapter.

<sup>14</sup> Working prisoners of war were allowed 3,300 calories a day compared with the allotted 2,375 to civilians and non-working POWs.

<sup>15</sup> Miriam Kochan, *Prisoners of England* (London: Macmillan Press, 1980), 71.

<sup>16</sup> *The Times*, 9 May 1945.

<sup>17</sup> *The Times*, 16 May 1945.

which, said Grigg, 'was substantially less than the average civilian consumption in this country'.<sup>18</sup>

The German soldiers felt these measures to be punitive and a sign of hatred.<sup>19</sup> Their sense of rejection would certainly have deepened when prisoners who had been shipped across the Channel from the Continent during the summer of 1945 recounted the silent disdain of the crowds who had gathered to witness their arrival: one prisoner observed that 'they looked through us as if we were glass'.<sup>20</sup> Of course it is understandable, and to be expected, that at such a sensitive time many British civilians would regard the German POWs entering the country with a considerable degree of trepidation. While the majority would have no actual contact with the prisoners, rural communities in particular found the prospect of working alongside their former arch-enemies to be a cause of real concern. Referring to the prisoners employed on his land in 1945, one Pembrokeshire farmer commented that he and his employees 'just hated them' and were only interested in the work that they could get out of them.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the same farmer claimed that such sentiments were widely felt by the British public, who 'looked at them with a feeling of distrust and hostility'.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, although this might have been the case in the immediate aftermath of the war, there is little evidence to suggest that such feelings led to anything more than the occasional grumble. Indeed, there was no widespread public demand for the implementation of punitive measures against the prisoners held in this country any more than there was for their immediate release. Moreover, the lack of direct contact between prisoners and public meant that any inimical attitudes that had

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<sup>18</sup> *The Times*, 30 May 1945.

<sup>19</sup> Henry Faulk, *Group Captives: The Re-education of German Prisoners of War in Britain 1945-1948* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1977), 19-31.

<sup>20</sup> M.B. Sullivan, *Thresholds of Peace*, 28.

<sup>21</sup> Letter to present writer from Pembrokeshire farmer A.W.H. Charles of Henllys Farm, Llanrhian, Haverfordwest, 6 February 2004.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

at first existed were gradually replaced by indifference towards the German POWs: the people of Britain were simply preoccupied with getting on with the many day-to-day problems facing them in 1945, and, in most cases, had neither the energy nor the inclination to remain anything but silent on an issue that they felt, on the whole, did not concern them. This silence, however, was sufficient to allow the government to implement its labour reparations policy unhindered. Ministers knew, of course, that the prisoners would have to go home at some point in the future, but there were, as we have seen, no rules in 1945 to say when precisely this should be. Repatriation was, therefore, restricted to those prisoners who were sick or unfit for work, numbering between two and three thousand men per month, which allowed officials to concentrate their efforts on the more challenging task of bringing as many German POWs into the UK as was logistically possible.

Of course, each of the Allied powers had its own ideas about repatriation and when this should take place. Immediately after VE Day the United States government promised its public that all prisoners would leave their country by the spring of 1946.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, while it met this obligation, prisoners leaving American shores were not necessarily on their way home to Germany. These were the 140,000 POWs held by the US on behalf of the British, who were sent to the UK, and the remainder to France as a labour force.<sup>24</sup> As far as the Canadian authorities were concerned in 1945, the issue of repatriation raised many more questions and was considerably more problematic than for the USA. Certainly, in Canada, as in the USA, there was a general desire to rid the country of German POWs as soon as possible after the war had ended, and, from an economic perspective, this seemed to make sense. A report

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<sup>23</sup> Ron Robin, *The Barbed Wire College: Re-educating German POWs in the United States During World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 127.

<sup>24</sup> LAC RG25/2784 621-LB-40, letter from the Canadian High Commission, London, to the Department of External Affairs, Ottawa, 18 October 1945.

written in July by the Canadian Department of National Defence stated that of the 34,000 German POWs held in the country on behalf of the United Kingdom only 18,400 were currently employed – 12,000 by the Department of Labour, 2,000 by the Department of National Defence, and 3,700 in unpaid work in camp administration and housekeeping.<sup>25</sup> The remainder, some 15,600, were not engaged in any form of work; of these 8,094 were unemployable officers, NCOs, and others considered ‘black’ or ‘dark grey’ in terms of their political outlook. Officials therefore argued that if these ‘unemployables’, in particular, were repatriated quickly the Department would be in a position to close six of the existing POW camps, thus freeing at least one and a half thousand of the 7,156 Veterans Guard personnel engaged in guarding prisoners of war in Canada for other duties, or release from service.<sup>26</sup>

It was difficult to deny the advantages of the Canadian repatriation proposal. Indeed, the Department of External Affairs (DEA) in Ottawa, for whom the report had been drafted, identified yet further potential benefits, pointing out that, in addition to lessening the administrative burden, the repatriation of unemployable POWs would relieve Canada of feeding and quartering, at a high subsistence level, prisoners of war who made no contribution to the Canadian economy. Furthermore, once released from their duties in Canada, personnel currently engaged in the administration of the POW camps and their inmates would become available for other duties, offering much-needed additional labour for the occupation authorities in Germany.<sup>27</sup> However, notwithstanding these potential benefits, the disadvantages of repatriating this element were glaringly obvious. Indeed, how could the Canadian government justify sending home the most ardent Nazis first when it was fully aware that all German POWs in its

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., correspondence from, A. Ross, Deputy Minister of the Department of National Defence, to N. A. Robertson, Under Secretary of State for External Affairs, 3 August 1945.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> LAC RG25/2784 621-LB-40, N.A. Robertson, Under Secretary of State for External Affairs, to G. Morley-Scott, Canadian High Commissioner, Canada House, London, 10 August 1945.

custody had a keen desire to be repatriated as soon as possible? Repatriation would, in that case, have appeared to reward the least deserving group, and, moreover, would have severely undermined the attempts that were being made to re-educate the prisoners. In addition, once repatriated, the usefulness of this group would anyway be limited, since they would have to work under armed guard furnished by the occupation forces. A more profitable option for Germany, according to the Under Secretary of State for External Affairs, was the repatriation of the 'better element'—those prisoners who had been placed in the 'white' or 'light grey' categories after their preliminary screening and indexed as to occupational training and qualifications.<sup>28</sup> Among these were, reportedly, men with experience in law, medicine, science, engineering, architecture, education, administration, business, type-setting, journalism, agricultural work and trade skills, all of whom appeared to have useful skills and expertise for the rehabilitation and reconstruction of Germany.

Before a final decision could be reached, the full range of possibilities regarding repatriation had to be considered. At the end of May 1945, S. Morley-Scott, the Canadian High Commissioner in the UK, told the DEA that much broader questions of policy had to be addressed and that planning for repatriation should not be based simply on the political 'colouring' of the prisoners or the need to alleviate certain material and manpower shortages in Canada. Indeed, it was felt that other, more important factors should determine policy: there was the humanitarian viewpoint to consider, which favoured repatriating POWs according to the length of their captivity – those held longest should be sent home first; alternatively, the list of those to be repatriated first could be based on the economic implications for Germany, such as the impact that repatriation would have on the industrial and agricultural life of that

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

country.<sup>29</sup> The question was also raised of placing German POW repatriation policy in the larger field of European politics:

Whether we consider it part of our policy with relation to Germany, or part of our policy with relation to Russia, it is clear that the disposition of these prisoners by the British countries is bound to be enormously important. Vis-à-vis Germany we may regard them as hostages or as potential bribes, whichever you like. Regarding Russia we must regard them as a counter poise to the weight of argument which the large number of German prisoners in Russian hands gives that country.<sup>30</sup>

In other words, German POWs, whatever their political category, should be regarded as valuable assets to be used as bargaining tools in international negotiations: they could be retained in order to ensure Germany's fulfilment of the terms of Unconditional Surrender, while simultaneously offering the Western Allies the means with which to negotiate for the release of prisoners originally from the Western zones of occupation, who were currently held by the Soviet authorities. In that case, POWs would be repatriated only when the requirements of both sides had been met.

However, the fact was that discussions between the High Commissioner and the Department of External Affairs in Ottawa regarding the repatriation of the POWs in Canada were, to a large degree, superfluous, since it was ultimately the British alone who would decide their fate: the prisoners were, after all, being held in Canada on behalf of the British government. Not surprisingly, the archives reveal evidence of a deterioration in the tone of communications between the two countries on this issue, much to the frustration of certain officials who felt that the whole question of repatriating the German POWs held in Canada was being handled 'rather casually at the London end'.<sup>31</sup> In November 1945, the Canadian government was eventually informed by the Foreign Office that all German POWs would be returned to Britain,

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<sup>29</sup> LAC RG25/2784 621-LB-40, memorandum by the Canadian High Commission, 31 May 1945.

<sup>30</sup> LAC RG25/2784 621-LB-40, S. Morley-Scott, Canadian High Commissioner, London, to A. Rive, Department of External Affairs, Ottawa, 31 May 1945.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., note by the Secretary of State for External Affairs, Canada, 25 October 1945.



rather than Germany, and that this would take place in order of political grading: ‘whites’ would be first, followed by ‘greys’, ‘blacks’ and, finally, the officers.<sup>32</sup> In the months that followed, the Canadian government attempted to persuade the British authorities to reverse this order of return so as to take account of Canada’s need to retain enough working prisoners to alleviate serious labour shortages in the lumber and other basic industries. However, as it became apparent that the chief goal of the Attlee government was to secure ‘more hands to keep the wheels of the UK economy turning’, any hope that the Canadian government might have had of persuading the British to accept first a group of POWs that could not be used to provide labour, had to be abandoned.

Nor did the idea that Britain should consider repatriating German POWs in a manner designed to help resolve certain foreign policy problems receive any attention in correspondence between the British and Canadian authorities. To the frustrated ‘astonishment’ of the Canadian High Commissioner, the British government had largely ignored the potential advantages to be gained in effectively holding prisoners to ransom.<sup>33</sup> In his view, the latter’s concerns were purely economic and, he added, ‘the possible value in the European military, political and diplomatic game of the possession of thousands of young and healthy male German bodies appears not to have entered into anybody’s calculations’.<sup>34</sup>

Of course it is true that the view most commonly expressed by the British government was that POW labour was not only justifiable as a form of reparations, but also necessary to assist the UK in meeting the economic needs of the country. However, the fact that British ministers did not discuss with Canada the possible

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., note on transfer of German POWs from Canada, 5 November 1945.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., letter from the Canadian High Commissioner, London, to the Department of External Affairs, Ottawa, 18 October 1945.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

political advantages of retaining prisoners does not necessarily imply that they had altogether neglected to give the matter their consideration. On the contrary, during January and February 1945, the idea of holding POWs as hostages had been the focus of several inter-departmental discussions.<sup>35</sup> These talks followed a request put forward by the British Military Chiefs of Staff, in whose eyes this course of action was both likely and logical: prior to the signing of the peace, the retention of POWs would ensure the complete fulfilment of all terms laid down by the Allies in the Instrument of Surrender, and, in addition, would serve to protect Allied personnel working in Germany during the occupation. Indeed, it was proposed that a fixed number of German POWs, worked out on a 'sliding scale according to the rank of the victim', might be held back from repatriation if any act of violence was perpetrated against Allied officers in Germany.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, a strong incentive for taking such a measure was the belief that the Russians had very similar intentions.

However, it was finally decided that, due to serious legal, rather than any moral, constraints, there would be little to gain from following such a policy. The War Office set out the following objections:

- (1) Reprisals against Prisoners of War would be a breach of Article 2 of the P.W. Convention.
- (2) Though it is true that the signature of the Instrument of Surrender would entitle us to waive such provisions of the P.W. Convention as are overridden by the Instrument, it would not justify the infliction of reprisals on German Prisoners of War.
- (3) A Prisoner of War and a Hostage are two quite different things and there is no method of converting one into the other.
- (4) There is no express obligation to repatriate PW until after the conclusion of peace, so that it might be possible to apply reprisals indirectly to prisoners of war by undertaking to advance the date of repatriation subject to the fulfilment by the Germans of certain conditions. Nevertheless the value of such a subterfuge to ourselves would be nullified by the fact that we should have to represent our action as not constituting a reprisal.

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<sup>35</sup> TNA: PRO CAB122/695, memorandum by Lieut.-General Sir Gordon N. Maccready, Commander, British Army Staff, 15 January 1945.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., War Office memorandum, 2 February 1945.

(5) The practical efficacy of the scheme was also doubtful. Resistance to the Allies is likely to be centred in an organisation of fanatics, who are unlikely to be deflected from their purpose by sympathy for either the prisoners of war or their dependents.<sup>37</sup>

After the war, the authorities, as we have seen, no longer regarded themselves as bound by the terms of the Geneva Convention. Nevertheless, the problem was that, while holding German prisoners as hostages might have been easy to justify in the immediate aftermath of war, officials would have found it increasingly difficult to convince British public opinion that it was right to do so. The decision to drop this proposal was, therefore, not based on any humanitarian considerations, which after all had not, to date, stood very high in the government's priorities as far as German POWs were concerned. It was due, rather, to the fact that it was important that Britain should be seen, both at home and abroad, to be acting at least in accordance with the 'spirit of Geneva'.

Ultimately, there was always a political dimension to the process of repatriation, which the increasing ideological divisions between the Eastern and Western Zones of Germany made it impossible to ignore. This is perhaps best shown in the British government's response to certain moral and political pressures associated with this process that it had had to face since 1944. These arose, in particular, from the question of whether or not to send home a number of non-German POWs in British hands, notably the approximately 50,000 'Cossacks' and other prisoners of Soviet origin who had been captured in German uniform, and whose return would be calculated to appease Stalin.<sup>38</sup> These prisoners, approximately 16,000 of whom had been shipped to the UK by October 1944, had, either through political conviction or sheer necessity,

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Nicholas Bethel, *The Last Secret: Forcible Repatriation to Russia 1944-1947* (London: André Deutsch, 1974), xii.

fought alongside the Nazis and been captured by the British and American forces after the Normandy invasion.<sup>39</sup> Now, regarded as traitors by the Soviet Union, they and their families almost certainly faced persecution or even death upon their repatriation. Nevertheless, despite understanding that this was likely to be the case, the British government did repatriate them. The Foreign Office set out its view in stark terms:

This is purely a question for the Soviet Authorities and does not concern His Majesty's Government. In due course, all those with whom the Soviet authorities desire to deal must be handed over to them, and we are not concerned with the fact that they [may] be shot or otherwise more harshly dealt with than they might be under English law.<sup>40</sup>

It is not surprising that, given the ethical dimension involved, the decision to repatriate this group has subsequently been subjected to harsh criticism. The most notorious example of this is to be found in Nikolai Tolstoy's discredited account of events, *The Minister and the Massacres* (1986).<sup>41</sup> However, to understand the rationale behind Britain's actions one cannot ignore, as Tolstoy was accused of doing, the political context and intellectual climate surrounding the issue at the time. As is asserted by Nicholas Bethel, and confirmed by the findings of a team of historians set up to examine the questions raised by Tolstoy's book, the most important factor leading to the repatriation of these POWs was pressing political necessity: the government was bound, by the repatriation conditions set out in the Yalta agreement of February 1945, to return them.<sup>42</sup> If it failed to do so, the thousands of British and

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<sup>39</sup> M.B. Sullivan, *Thresholds of Peace*, 19.

<sup>40</sup> TNA: PRO WO32/11137, memorandum by Patrick Dean, a legal adviser to the Foreign Office, 24 June 1944.

<sup>41</sup> Nikolai Tolstoy, *The Minister and the Massacres* (London: Hutchinson, 1986) is the subject of Thomas M. Barker's essay, 'A British Variety of Pseudohistory', in G. Bischof and E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower and the German POWs: Facts Against Falsehood* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1992). Tolstoy maintained that a plan to forcibly repatriate this group of prisoners had been secretly drawn up by Harold Macmillan, in 1945 resident minister at Allied Forces Headquarters in Caserta (Naples), and General Sir Charles Keightley, commander of the British Fifth Corps, in deliberate defiance of government policy. The accusations made by Tolstoy led to a high profile libel case in the High Court, which eventually, on 29 November 1989, was decided against the author who was forced to pay damages and costs of over two million pounds whilst his book was withdrawn from publication. In 1996 the case was referred to the European Court of Human Rights.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

American prisoners held at the end of the war in German prison camps on territory now under Soviet control would be placed in a dangerous position. Added to this was the government's desire to appease public opinion regarding the Soviet Union. Since 1941, British propaganda had been recording the suffering and extolling the heroism of the Russian people. It had concealed the true character of the Soviet government, thus, by 1945, presenting Russia as a steadfast ally and making any hint of a lukewarm attitude towards that country on the part of the Western powers a betrayal. But the crux of the matter was that the British government had, according to the then Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, 'no legal or moral right' to interfere in how the Soviet leader treated the men who had turned against him, and was, therefore, above all determined not to exasperate him by refusing to return the prisoners.<sup>43</sup> Had it done so, moreover, unnecessary stress might have been placed upon relations between the British and Soviet authorities in Germany. This was a time when the former were depending upon the help of the latter to alleviate difficulties arising in the British Zone of Occupation, where the presence of hundreds of thousands of German POWs was exacerbating the already dire material conditions prevailing there during the summer of 1945. As a consequence of this turmoil, the CCG(BE) approached the Soviet Union with a request not only to stop the disbandment of POWs originating from the British zone, but also to accept the return of prisoners originating from the Soviet zone, currently in British hands.<sup>44</sup> This is just one illustration of the practical and political difficulties which had, at least to those officials handling the negotiations, made the repatriation of the 'Cossacks' morally digestible. In the meantime, the true implications of their decisions were concealed from the general public, which instead was led to believe that these prisoners were not, in fact,

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<sup>43</sup> Anthony Eden, cited in Nicholas Bethel, *The Last Secret*, 12.

<sup>44</sup> TNA: PRO FO1032/858, CCG (BE) report, 'Disposal of ex-Wehrmacht personnel in the British Zone', 15 September 1945.

reluctant to return to the Soviet Union: on the contrary, according to a reporter for *The Times*, 'all had but one goal – to get home'.<sup>45</sup>

To many, no doubt, it appeared that the British government was fulfilling its international obligations and maintaining good relations with the Soviet Union, while also managing to provide Britain with the German POW workers that she desperately needed. For the remainder of 1945, therefore, there was simply no reason for officials to announce a date for final repatriation: they were placed under no pressure to do so, and the issue was low in priority compared with the need to find enough able-bodied workers to bring in the following year's harvest. However, the beginning of 1946 marked a turning-point in British attitudes towards the POWs. By this time anti-German feeling among the British population had begun to subside as journalists, reporting first hand from the British Zone of Occupation, sent back the first reports about the true state of Germany. Perhaps the most prominent, and influential, of the commentators, in terms of rallying public support for the German cause, was the British socialist, author and publisher, Victor Gollancz. In September 1945, he had founded the movement 'Save Europe Now', whose aim was both to channel any existing goodwill towards Germany into practical action and to put pressure on the government. In 1946 Gollancz also published two books, *In Darkest Germany* and *Our Threatened Values*, in which he described, in considerable detail, the magnitude of the chaos he had encountered:

I have just returned from visiting a 'bunker' – a huge air-raid shelter, without daylight or air, where 800 children get their schooling. In one class of 41 children, 23 had had no breakfast, and nothing whatever to eat until half past two, when they had the school meal of half a litre of soup, without bread...Seven of these children had the ugly skin-blemishes that are mixed up in some way with malnutrition; all were white and pasty. Their gaping 'shoes'...mean the end of what little health they have when the wet weather comes....

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<sup>45</sup> *The Times*, 6 July 1945.

Bits of dirty rag: a thin strip over a stocking full of holes: soles – innumerable soles – completely broken away from the uppers – these were common form. Then there were the children hobbling painfully in shoes borrowed from a younger brother: and children slopping about in their mother's or father's shoes.... The teachers estimate that when the really wet weather started, 'shoe absenteeism' might amount to 50 per cent....<sup>46</sup>

It was the beginning of a persistent campaign in the press and in radio broadcasts, which helped to create a developing groundswell that eventually began to disturb the indifference that had, up until then, been felt towards the German POWs.

This change in attitude is also attributable to the fact that German prisoners of war were becoming an increasingly familiar sight, particularly in the British countryside. With more and more prisoners working without supervision, and many others billeted on farms, barriers between them and the wider British public began to crumble, and the illegal act of 'fratting' with the Germans became a more common occurrence. Although language was often a barrier to communication, there were always other means by which the public could express empathy, develop rapport and establish trust with prisoners, such as offering them food and cups of tea. Moreover, the illegality of this practice also offered some civilians the opportunity to demonstrate their sense of injustice over the 'cold-shouldering' of the German POWs and their prolonged retention. John Griffiths, the son of a Pembrokeshire publican, recalled his mother's defiance towards the authorities:

During the winter of 1945-1946 there was heavy snow-fall and the German POWs were deployed in clearing roads. My mother took pity and decided to supply some hot tea but the NCO in command refused to allow this. My mother took off to see the Camp Commandant and on her return served the prisoners with pints of beer. I suspect that the tea would have been better appreciated, but she was making a point.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Victor Gollancz, *In Darkest Germany*, cited in Dennis L. Bark & David R. Gress, *The History of West Germany: From Shadow to Substance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 131.

<sup>47</sup> Letter to the present writer from Mr John Griffiths, Tenby, Pembrokeshire, January 2004.

Throughout the course of 1946 the public became increasingly opposed to the policy of retaining the POWs in Britain and the government felt it was under increasing pressure to make some kind of response. In June the head of POWD's religious section, the Reverend Charles Cranfield, was asked to compile a report on the decline in POW morale for the Bishop of Sheffield, who was due to raise the whole question of prisoners of war in the House of Lords. Cranfield reported a widespread loss of hope and interest among the POWs: they felt that they were being treated worse than criminals, who were at least told the length of their sentence.<sup>48</sup> On 11 July the question of the government's duty towards the German POWs was raised in the Lords. During this debate prominent members of Britain's religious establishment criticised the Labour government, above all, for allowing the user departments, notably the Ministries of Agriculture and Labour, to have so much control over the POWs' retention, as well as the TUC for accepting a situation in which the prisoners were employed as degraded labour. Five days after the Lords debate a public meeting took place at Central Hall, Westminster, organised by Gollancz's 'Save Europe Now' organisation.<sup>49</sup> The Labour MP Richard Stokes presided over the meeting, which was attended by Gollancz himself, members of Parliament, representatives of the Church and other religious and welfare organisations. The meeting passed a resolution calling on the government to draw up a definite scheme for the release of the prisoners.<sup>50</sup>

Meanwhile, in the House of Commons, the government was facing frequent attacks for its continuing failure to announce a date for repatriation. The main protagonist was again Richard Stokes, who put forward, in his usual inflammatory

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<sup>48</sup> M.B. Sullivan, *Thresholds of Peace*, 176.

<sup>49</sup> MSS 292/881 423/8 T2147, extracts from *The Manchester Guardian*, 17 July 1946, 'Slave Trading by Government', and *News Chronicle*, 29 July 1946, 'How Long? How Long?'.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.



style, the humanitarian issues at stake, declaring, among other things, that, 'if the House of Commons of about the only free nation is reduced to a state of mind like that, then God help the world'.<sup>51</sup> The serious press also began to speak on behalf of the German prisoners, warning, for example, that a delay in their repatriation was likely to counteract efforts being made in the British Zone to encourage 'a "good neighbour" in the Germany of the future'.<sup>52</sup> The government, feeling increasingly isolated, went on the defensive. It reiterated the following points: that the prisoners were usefully employed on work of 'urgent national importance' for which British labour was unavailable; that, as was emphasised by the Minister of State, Philip Noel-Baker, prisoners engaged in food production for the Ministry of Agriculture were, in effect, producing food for Germany itself; and that, in any case, Britain was not flouting international law by refusing to return them to their native country.<sup>53</sup> Of course this response was to be expected. After all, the government could scarcely defend the continuing shipment of POWs to the UK during the summer of 1946, while simultaneously putting into place a schedule for repatriation on a large scale: the policies were simply incompatible. However, the arguments ministers did put forward during these debates, which were reported in the press, had the adverse effect to that intended and actually increased public sympathy for the prisoners. This can be seen in the many letters addressed to newspaper editors expressing a general concern that, in failing to make a definite commitment to immediate, or at least to phased, repatriation, Britain was acting neither correctly nor humanely.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Hansard HOC, 27 March 1946, col.537.

<sup>52</sup> *The Times*, 8 August 1946.

<sup>53</sup> Hansard HOC, 29 July 1946, cols. 547-550.

<sup>54</sup> Henry Faulk, *Group Captives*, 46.

On 21 August 1946, as if taking advantage of this upsurge of public concern, the 'Save Europe Now' organisation sponsored a petition, signed by 875 men and women from various walks of life, appealing to the Prime Minister to take action.<sup>55</sup> It stated:

Some of them have been prisoners for many years. More than a year has now elapsed since victory, but they are still told nothing about the date on which they may be expected to be repatriated. There comes a point at which men cannot live without hope. For the sake, therefore, of common humanity and of the British 'good name', we earnestly beg H.M. Government (1) to draw up a definite scheme for the release of these men, if necessary by various categories, at the earliest possible dates: (2) to announce this scheme to the prisoners with the minimum of delay, since the certainty of release even at a relatively distant date would be less intolerable than the present uncertainty.<sup>56</sup>

The response from the government was swift. On 28 August Attlee ordered a review of the matter by all government departments affected. Within just two weeks the Cabinet agreed on a scheme of repatriation, which would commence at the end of September: the number of prisoners returning home from the UK would be stepped up from 2,000 to 15,000, plus an additional 500 'compassionate cases', every month.<sup>57</sup> On 26 September 1946 the first contingent, comprising 500 prisoners, left the port of Hull on board the British Army of the Rhine (BAOR) leave ship, 'Spearhead'.<sup>58</sup> It was the beginning of a process which would continue for almost two years.

The sudden change in British government policy was not entirely satisfactory. It had, no doubt, been introduced in order to influence public opinion in Germany as well as to placate certain elements at home. It did neither. The main criticism of the scheme was that it lacked clarity: who, it was asked, would go first and how would they be chosen? The War Office had suggested that all 6,000 officer POWs and

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<sup>55</sup> *The Times*, 22 August 1946, 'Appeal to the Prime Minister'. The 875 signatories included three Roman Catholic Archbishops, 55 Anglican Bishops and other church leaders, 118 MPs, 76 members of the Royal Society, heads of colleges and schools and men and women prominent in the public life of the country.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *The Times*, 13 September 1946.

<sup>58</sup> *The Times*, 27 September 1946.

protected personnel, namely the sick and wounded, who were not working, should take priority.<sup>59</sup> This, it was pointed out, would not only meet the humanitarian preoccupations of the public, but would also bring about a saving of £1,000,000 a year to the British exchequer.<sup>60</sup> However, this proposal was eventually rejected on the grounds that the morale of the remaining prisoners would be bound to be adversely affected, and this in turn would have a negative impact upon their labour productivity. In the end, the government's order of selection gave priority first to prisoners with manual skills, such as miners and carpenters, whose talents were needed in the British Occupation Zone in Germany. These were followed by POWs whose political colouring was classified as 'white', as well as the sick and those prisoners whose families were suffering particular hardships in Germany. Thereafter, repatriation would depend on the length of time the individual soldier had spent in captivity.

The problem with this arrangement, as was pointed out at the time, was that the uncertainty of the screening process made it unfair: in other words, the mere fact that a prisoner had been graded 'black' did not necessarily mean that he was a Nazi. In addition, since the order of repatriation now rested on the political grading assigned to the prisoners, it was also bound to lead to an atmosphere of unrest and cynicism in the camps.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, the government, it appeared, had completely overlooked what should have been its moral obligation to repatriate as a matter of urgency certain elements within Britain's POW population in advance of the others. In a debate on 8 October 1946, the plight of three specific groups of prisoners was brought to the attention of the House.<sup>62</sup> The first of these comprised the approximately 300 Sudeten

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<sup>59</sup> TNA: PRO MAF 47/138, memorandum regarding pay of German officer POWs and 'protected personnel'. Article 23 of the Geneva Convention stated that German officers should be paid at rates obtaining in the German armed forces, and not required to work.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Hansard HOC, 8 October 1946, cols. 147-164.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

Germans in Britain's POW camps whose families had now been expelled to West Germany. The second contained young German prisoners who had been classified 'grey' or 'black': it was felt that, since young Germans were benefiting from a general amnesty in Germany, on the grounds that they had been 'too young to be doing other than merely conforming to the *status quo*', it would be a 'very good democratic and educational' exercise to prioritise the repatriation of young Germans in British hands and, in the meantime, to grant them certain, although as yet unspecified, privileges. The third case to be brought to ministers' attention involved a proportion of the 98,000 German POWs held by the British in the Middle East, who, due to shipping difficulties, had not been included in the government's original repatriation scheme.<sup>63</sup> These were men who had actually been imprisoned in concentration camps by the Nazis regime for their anti-Nazi views and who had subsequently been forced to fight for Hitler in what was referred to as the '999 Battalion'. The exact number of these men was unknown, mainly because their political screening had been based on the reports of the German NCOs and camp attendants, men who had been initially selected for their own loyalty to the German state and who were without exception firm Nazis, but who had been captured along with the 'reluctant' German soldiers. During a debate in the House of Commons on 8 October speakers implored British officials to acknowledge that they had a moral duty to these prisoners who, it was obvious to all, had 'gone through hell for the Gestapo'.<sup>64</sup> It was imperative to identify this specific group of POWs and expedite their release and return to Germany.

The government, as ever determined not to be forced into a corner on the repatriation issue, stated simply that there were to be no exceptions: all prisoners would take their place according to the scheme laid out and, in any case, the

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<sup>63</sup> Hansard HOC, 22 October 1946, col. 1468.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

administrative manpower that would be required to identify these prisoners and put such a preferential system into effect, was simply not available.<sup>65</sup> If this meant, as John Freeman, the Financial Secretary of State at the War Office, suggested, pouring ‘a douche of cold water on the warm hearted sentiments of members’ with regard to the future of these prisoners, then so be it.<sup>66</sup>

While refusing to give special recognition to the claims of these three specific groups of POWs, the Sudeten Germans, the very young and the ‘reluctant’ soldiers, the government had, somewhat paradoxically, made provision for the return per month of 500 prisoners on compassionate grounds. Applications for this type of early release could not be made by a POW himself but had to originate from his family in Germany on a form obtained from the local German *Kreis* authority. If the grounds for release were considered reasonable by the *Kreis* officials the application would be passed to the Control Commission and then forwarded to the War Office. One of the first men to meet the criteria for compassionate repatriation was Paul Becker, a prisoner in the UK since June 1944. His case demonstrates the level of suffering experienced by some POW families: officials were informed that his wife had lost both legs in a street accident in June 1946 and was still in hospital, and that only one of his two children had survived the war, the other having died of starvation in February 1945.<sup>67</sup>

Although there were certainly enough genuine cases similar to this one to keep the authorities occupied, a system of this kind, which was based on individual testimony and petition, was bound to encourage a degree of dishonesty. This was revealed during a spot check in September 1947, when the POWD discovered that a substantial number of POWs had been repatriated following bogus compassionate

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<sup>65</sup> Hansard HOC, 29 October 1946, col.82.

<sup>66</sup> Hansard HOC, 25 October 1946, col. 162.

<sup>67</sup> Hansard HOC, 5 February 1946, col. 352-353.

claims.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, it was found whilst fifty-five per cent of cases investigated were thoroughly deserving and twenty-six per cent were acceptable, the remainder, nineteen per cent, were entirely fraudulent.<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, despite the problems it inevitably encountered, and the fact that fewer than five per cent of the prisoners held in the UK were ultimately sent home on compassionate grounds, the scheme proved to be a source of pride to the British government.<sup>70</sup> According to Henry Faulk, it was considered by officials, although not by prisoners, to be a gesture of 'pure humanity without strings', and, since the French, Americans and Russians either failed or refused to implement similar schemes, it was a gesture which could be claimed as unique to Britain.<sup>71</sup>

On 28 January 1947, the government announced that a total of 60,668 prisoners had been sent home since the start of the general repatriation scheme. In addition, it had relaxed many of the rules governing the lives of German POWs still held in Britain: including lifting the ban on fraternisation at the end of 1946 and permitting well-behaved prisoners to take unescorted walks within a five-mile radius of their camp and to accept invitations to private houses.<sup>72</sup> Matthew Barry Sullivan describes the public's response:

That Christmas of 1946 brought a dramatic breakthrough of human feeling. All over the country invitations poured into the camps. On Christmas and Boxing Day there were queues of cars outside many sentried gates, waiting to take home an unknown guest, oddly signed for in the army manner as 'one live body'. ... For the first time in years Germans sat down with a family, with women and children.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Henry Faulk, *Group Captives*, 47

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 47. Faulk states that 19,761 POWs were returned to Germany on compassionate grounds.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> Hansard HOC, 10 December 1946.

<sup>73</sup> M.B. Sullivan, *Thresholds of Peace*, 187.

However, the apparent turn-around in policy did not mean that officials had totally lost sight of the important role played by German POWs in Britain's agricultural economy. The 1947 Agricultural Act, drawn up during the period of austerity in Britain, stated that the object of government policy in that sector of the economy was 'to promote a stable and efficient industry capable of producing such part of the nation's food as in the national interest it is desirable to produce in the United Kingdom'.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, the focus in Britain was on self-sufficiency: everything that could be produced in the UK would be produced there. The prime factor determining this decision was the dollar crisis, which afflicted Britain's economic performance for years after the end of Lend-Lease, but which was in a particularly acute phase in 1947. The disruption of world agriculture, chiefly caused by the war, compelled Britain as well as other countries to rely more heavily on US products than had been the case during the 1930s. However, Britain's dollar reserves, and hence her ability to pay for imports from the United States, had been seriously depleted. The main reason for this was that, in accordance with the conditions laid down in the 1946 American Loan Agreement<sup>75</sup>, countries which had exported to Britain during the war in exchange for sterling were now able to convert their sterling balances into dollars, which the British were obliged to supply at the fixed exchange rate of \$4.03 to £1.<sup>76</sup> For Britain, therefore, sterling convertibility had the double disadvantage not only of leading to a desperate shortage of currency with which to buy American goods, but also that any goods that were purchased came at an extremely high price. Baring this

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<sup>74</sup> B.A Holderness, *British Agriculture Since 1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 13-14.

<sup>75</sup> Kenneth Harris, *Attlee* (London: Wiedenfield & Nicholson, 1982), 274. Britain borrowed \$3,750 million from the USA, repayable at 2% over fifty years, beginning December 1945; wartime costs of Lend-Lease were written off and an extra credit of \$650 million was granted by the USA on the same terms to enable Britain to pay for the delivery of goods already in the pipeline when Lend-Lease came to an end on VJ Day.

<sup>76</sup> James Foreman-Peck, *A History of the World Economy: International Economic Relations Since 1850* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995), 243.

in mind and with the intention both of improving the nutritional health of the nation and making substantial and vital imports savings, the government drew up a plan for investment and development in agriculture, which it was hoped would result in an increase in net output between 1947 and 1952 of twenty per cent.<sup>77</sup> The prospect of a reduced agricultural workforce brought about by a speeding up of the repatriation of German POWs, threatened the successful implementation of this plan. Not surprisingly, this posed a serious dilemma for the government.

Accordingly, in February 1947, having already resisted pleas to double the monthly repatriation number to 30,000, officials announced that the process could not be accelerated for economic reasons, in particular the necessity of providing enough labour to bring in that year's harvest.<sup>78</sup> In April a final repatriation date was set which would, hopefully, allow Britain to meet this objective. At the Moscow Conference of Foreign Ministers, the Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, secured the signing of an agreement between Britain, France and the Soviet Union undertaking to repatriate all German prisoners of war by the end of December 1948.<sup>79</sup> With Russia still clinging to her claim of \$10 billion worth of reparations at 1938 prices, and the Allies failing once again to agree on the terms of a peace treaty with Germany, this was an unexpected achievement for Bevin.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, according to Allan Bullock, the repatriation settlement was 'the one positive achievement of this sterile year'.<sup>81</sup>

Nevertheless, it appeared to some observers that the British government's real intention at Moscow had been to gain international approval for a policy which would effectively retain German prisoners for up to three and a half years after the war had

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<sup>77</sup> B.A. Holderness, *British Agriculture Since 1945*, 16.

<sup>78</sup> Hansard HOC, 3 December 1946, col. 203.

<sup>79</sup> Although Russia signed the agreement to repatriate them all by the end of 1948, many German POWs languished in the Soviet camps until 1956.

<sup>80</sup> Adrian Webb, *Germany since 1945* (London and New York: Longman, 1998), 12.

<sup>81</sup> M.B. Sullivan, *Thresholds of Peace*, 186 f.n., citing a letter from Bullock to Sullivan.



ended. For instance, on 7 July 1947, the *Evening Standard* published a leading article, headlined 'Men in Darkness', condemning the practice and arguing for the prisoners' immediate release:

The slave labour camps which dot our countryside corrode the nation hardly less than the men they house. They do not satisfy, but merely mask Britain's need for the permanent recruitment of workers on the soil. They are the negation of the principles for which we fought. They plant lasting bitterness and disillusion into their inmates. The German prisoners should be repatriated at twice, at three times the present rate, as fast as ships can be provided. Whatever else they may have lost, these men retain their right to go home.<sup>82</sup>

Within days of the publication of this appeal the 'Save Europe Now' organisation joined the discussion. In a 'Memorial to the Prime Minister' it expressed gratitude to Bevin for making some headway on the repatriation issue, but went on to demand a revision of the Moscow agreement to allow for a general speeding up of the entire process to ensure that all POWs were sent home six months earlier than the time that had been agreed.<sup>83</sup> There were, however, a number of reasons why increasing the monthly repatriation quota to meet this demand was impractical.

This became during discussions on the possibility of raising the monthly figure to 50,000, which took place on 15 August 1947, when a number of issues were raised.<sup>84</sup> In the first instance, ministers were reminded that there was only one ship which could transport the POWs across the Channel, and in the second, that the official discharge camp at Münster Lager in Germany had a maximum capacity of only 30,000 men.<sup>85</sup> It would not be able to cope. In addition to these logistical difficulties, the Ministry of Agriculture expressed serious concern about parting with its POW workforce, even by the end of 1948. It advocated once again the release of

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<sup>82</sup> MSS292/881 423/8 T2147, 'Men in Darkness', *Evening Standard*, 7 July 1947. (Emphasis in original).

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 'Memorial to the Prime Minister', July 1947.

<sup>84</sup> TNA: PRO FO371/66713, minutes of a meeting held to discuss the speedier repatriation of prisoners of war, 15 August 1947.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

only the 'unemployables', emphasising that POWs would still be desperately needed during the following spring and summer for the planting of crops and in autumn to bring in the harvest.<sup>86</sup>

The government was, therefore, faced once again with the problem of having to find a solution that would appease all. One possibility, which MAF was particularly keen to pursue, was to continue to employ German prisoners, but as free workers. The Foreign Office felt that this would definitely be a step in the right direction. Indeed, the case of the Italian POWs had already set a valuable precedent and, hopefully, it would transmit the right signal to Germany as well as to other countries who might have harboured a degree of suspicion about Britain's intentions *vis à vis* her German POWs. Moreover, an arrangement of this kind would also address the concerns of certain MPs and numerous British citizens, who were writing letters to the Foreign Secretary demanding that POWs should be offered a one-year contract and, in addition, the opportunity to continue working in Britain after 1948.<sup>87</sup> But, before going ahead with this policy, the Foreign Office imposed certain preconditions: prisoners would have to volunteer to become free workers; the International Committee of the Red Cross would supervise the procedures; employment contracts given to prisoners would be incontestable; and the employment of German POWs would not in any way prejudice the immigration of displaced persons (DPs) from Central Europe.<sup>88</sup>

Indeed, that the government was simultaneously making arrangements to transport displaced persons from the Continent to work in the UK is worthy of comment. Officials had been drawing up plans to do so since the middle of 1946, and in December that year the Foreign Labour Committee of the cabinet agreed to the

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> TNA: PRO FO371/64379, Foreign Office memorandum, 23 September 1947.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.; Johannes-Dieter Steinert, 'British Recruitment of German Labour 1945-50', 172-186.

Ministry of Labour's proposal to bring in DPs in order to address the chronic shortage of textile workers in the country.<sup>89</sup> The lack of labour in this and other areas of the British economy was considered by the Ministry to be slowing down the production of raw materials and semi-finished goods, thus posing a constant threat to the employment of British workers in industries producing finished goods for the domestic market, but, above all, for export. In February 1947, the Economic Survey concluded: 'Foreign labour can make a useful contribution to our needs. The old arguments against foreign labour are no longer valid. There is no danger for years to come that foreign labour will rob British workers of their jobs.'<sup>90</sup> The focus in 1947 was, of course, on the export drive, and the loss of German POWs, which might have compromised this, was to be alleviated to some degree by the employment of foreign workers. The government consequently began its recruitment campaigns in Germany, and in April of that year operation 'Westward Ho' was started in the British zone, resulting in the recruitment of 74,412 workers for the UK. On 4 November 1947, the Minister of Labour, George Isaacs, informed the Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, that by March 1948 an additional 10,000 female workers would be needed in the textile industry, with a further 26,000 after that date, a demand which, it was considered, could only be met through the continued recruitment of foreign labour.<sup>91</sup> The decision to retain German POWs in Britain after 1948 as free workers must therefore be appreciated in the context of these developments.

It was on the basis of the criteria set forth by the Foreign Office that, in October 1947, the government reached its decision to offer POWs the opportunity of changing their status. The scheme stipulated that the number of free workers was not to exceed 10,000; they were only to be employed in agriculture; and their contracts would

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>90</sup> Cited in *ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

expire on 31 December 1948. The repatriation quota was also increased from December 1947 to 20,000 per month.<sup>92</sup> The government hoped that this scheme would help Britain maintain her agricultural output while at the same time addressing the public pressure for earlier repatriation. Officials also felt confident that the trade unions would be unlikely to object to the plan as it was a temporary measure designed to remedy manpower shortages. At first there was nothing to indicate any major dissent over the issue. However, when farmers began to voice their frustration and anxiety over losing their prisoners in just over a year, MAF demanded not only that more POWs should be granted 'free' status but also that their period of employment should be extended beyond December 1948. This prospect posed a new set of problems in terms of persuading both domestic and foreign opinion of Britain's honourable intentions. Yet, since limited housing hampered the immigration of DPs, and it also seemed impossible to recruit seasonal workers from the Continent, the extended employment of German POWs could only be a help, and not a hindrance, to the ailing British economy. Not surprisingly, the number of POWs accorded this status gradually increased beyond the 10,000 limit that had been set in October and, to allay any fears that they were being forcibly detained, the government concocted a plan to demonstrate their freedom of choice: the men would be allowed a short 'holiday' in Germany, they would be discharged at Münster Lager, and would then return to Britain.

In August 1948, following discussions between MAF, the Ministry of Labour and representatives of the labour unions, the government agreed to accord the right to permanent residence to all foreign workers already employed on farms.<sup>93</sup> It has been estimated that of the 24,000 German ex-POW free workers remaining in the UK by

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<sup>92</sup> TNA: PRO FO371/64380, memorandum from MAF to the County War Agricultural Executive Committees for England and Wales, 14 and 21 November 1947.

<sup>93</sup> J.D. Steinert, 'British Recruitment of German Labour, 1945-50', 175.

August 1948, around 15,000 accepted the offer and chose to stay in Britain.<sup>94</sup> Of these, the majority no doubt felt that they had no option but to stay, and did so for mostly negative reasons. After all, Germany was in chaos, many homes had been destroyed, some workers originated from East Germany or what was now Poland, and many of the men simply had no families to return to. Indeed, so bleak was their outlook that around 6,000 of the POWs who had elected to stay in Britain even rejected the government's offer of a 'holiday' in Germany.<sup>95</sup>

The repatriation of all other POWs was completed by July 1948, six months earlier than had been agreed at the Moscow Conference. On their arrival in Germany, they were immediately confronted with the shocking scale of destruction that had befallen their homeland, a sight which often aroused great bitterness. As one prisoner, who had been sent to the UK from Canada in 1946, recalled,

Exhausted, tubercular women came up to us and many children begging a little bread. It became very quiet in our compartment. We're going to rot away are we? Those swine, those criminals! Why did they make us work an extra year in England? It was here we were desperately needed. From this moment on many of us began to doubt the good-will of our western conquerors.<sup>96</sup>

At Münster Lager, the main discharge centre for POWs from all countries, including the USSR, prisoners were put through a process involving documentation, and a medical examination, and were provided with identity papers, a certificate of release and a ration card for food and clothing. It was here that many POWs coming from Britain appeared to lose any sense of self-pity or anger they might have harboured over their wasted years in captivity. The sight of POWs who had been repatriated by the Soviet Union because they were considered by the authorities there to be unfit for

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Lothar Kettenacker, 'The Germans After 1945', 189.

<sup>96</sup> M.B. Sullivan, *Thresholds of Peace*, 366.

work was enough to make the 'British' POWs reassess their fate.<sup>97</sup> 'Soviet' prisoners were reported to have been as pale as corpses, with shaven heads; many were almost dead from starvation while others needed to have limbs amputated.<sup>98</sup> There were also numerous cases among this group of 'homecomer disease' (*Heimkehrerkrankheit*), a term used to describe a traumatic personality change caused by lasting malnutrition combined with high emotional stress levels. The label 'straightjacket syndrome' (*Zwangsjackensyndrom*) was later applied to those who experienced difficulties in settling back into normal life.<sup>99</sup> Indeed, in comparison with those who had been held in the Soviet camps, prisoners arriving from Britain had been well fed and were well clothed and laden with luggage and goods.<sup>100</sup>

Furthermore, according to the camp authorities at Münster Lager, the healthier physical state of the POWs arriving from Britain was not the only point of difference between them and those from all other places of detention. Indeed, it was reported that the 'British' prisoners were generally, albeit to differing degrees, characterised by a psychological confidence and hope for the future.<sup>101</sup> The early repatriates in particular, and the 'blacks' too, though perhaps to a lesser degree, seemed to feel that their experiences in Britain had made them spiritually stronger, more enthusiastic and therefore more able than the civilian population in Germany to build a better world. A Military Government Report in October 1946 concluded:

The German interrogators were unanimous in their reports on the extraordinary confidence of the repatriates and on their readiness to answer questions, although they knew that

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<sup>97</sup> Manfred Malzahn, *Germany 1945-1949: A Sourcebook* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 140. Malzahn states that at the end of 1947, ninety per cent of all POWs released from the Russian zone were also found by doctors in the West to be unfit for work.

<sup>98</sup> M.B. Sullivan, *Thresholds of Peace*, 366.

<sup>99</sup> Manfred Malzahn, *Germany 1945-1949*, 141.

<sup>100</sup> Miriam Kochan, *Prisoners of England*, 236. Prisoners were allowed the same baggage as British troops: all personal property they had acquired legitimately; fifteen pounds in weight of foodstuffs and 300 cigarettes or the equivalent in tobacco. In addition every prisoner could carry a parcel of books and his kit, and any surplus baggage could be sent in advance via parcel post.

<sup>101</sup> Henry Faulk, *Group Captives*, 192-193.

the interrogators were paid by Military Government. One woman reported that she had not till then understood how much hope there was for Germany's future. Until then she had believed that Germany had lost its moral strength for good. Others reported that meeting the repatriates had inspired them with courage and enthusiasm.<sup>102</sup>

To the POWs, the difference in attitude between them and the civilian population was equally clear, and often quite shocking. Henry Faulk attributes this difference to the fact that, while prisoners in general retained respect for at least some of the social institutions of National Socialism but had abandoned its attitudes, for the mass of the civilian population the opposite had occurred: National Socialism had been rejected as a political system, because it had failed, but the attitudes which had ensured cooperation with it remained largely intact.<sup>103</sup> As a consequence of this widespread denial of, or inability to face, reality among the general population, the only way of enabling these prisoners to exert any influence on the psychological renewal of Germany would have been to have shaped them, early on, into some sort of organised social force. This, however, did not happen. Instead, the authorities focused on their need for technical and administrative personnel: moral regeneration would come later.

An important opportunity was missed and, as a result, prisoners who had left the UK as part of a group became atomised. As individuals they too concerned themselves more with the physical rather than the psychological collapse of their country: survival, finding their families and a home became the priorities. They were helped in this by the YMCA, the Salvation Army and the German Red Cross, who had put notices in camp newspapers in Britain asking those with no home to go to, to write in advance giving their personal details. However, the scale of destruction in Germany, where it is estimated that more than fifty per cent of pre-war dwellings in all major cities had been destroyed, meant that these organisations found themselves

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<sup>102</sup> POWD, Military Government Report, October 1946, cited in Henry Faulk, *Group Captives*, 193.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 187-188.

unable to meet demand.<sup>104</sup> As a result, POWs often took matters into their own hands and began the search for accommodation themselves. An official estimate of 1948 gives a figure of two million repatriates, or *Heimkehrer* (homecomers), wandering the roads in the three Western zones, having no homes to go to either because their families were dead, or their wives had found someone else during their enforced absence.<sup>105</sup>

The departure of the last remaining German prisoners from Britain had been accompanied by a sigh of relief from many quarters, including the government. This was because, although officials could ultimately cling for solace to the notion that POWs in British hands had been better off than those held in Russia, they were conscious of the fact that the departure of the German POWs signalled the end of a deeply controversial policy, whose authors had given it dubious legal justification through the rewriting of international law. Moreover, what these officials had not anticipated as a consequence of the policy, after mid-1946 there were loud and continuous public calls for moral justice, in the form of widespread demands for the prisoners' release. Of course, that the government in some measure conceded to this demand comes as no surprise: after 1945 the political situation in Europe was rapidly changing, and Britain's POW labour policy had to be adapted accordingly. Indeed, how otherwise could Britain take her place alongside other nations, particularly Germany, in rightfully condemning the prolonged retention and ill-treatment of prisoners held in the Soviet Union? Nevertheless, the decision to repatriate the prisoners seems to have sprung from a pragmatic desire to regain political advantage and respectability, rather than from a sense of common decency and humanity; it

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<sup>104</sup> Adrian Webb, *Germany Since 1945*, 77.

<sup>105</sup> Manfred Malzahn, *Germany 1945-1949*, 129.



therefore falls neatly into place with all other aspects of POW policy, which are ultimately disappointing to say the least, and not to Britain's credit.

## Conclusion

Between 1940 and 1948, British policy towards German prisoners of war changed course several times. The first of these changes of direction took place in the summer of 1940 when the government decided to deport all German prisoners falling into British hands to the dominions, specifically to Canada, and afterwards also to the USA. Although discussion on the subject of what would happen to the POWs at the end of the war continued throughout the conflict, at governmental and inter-governmental levels, this remained Britain's strategy until 1945. However, the end of hostilities in Europe saw a complete reversal in policy: the government was now determined to go to any lengths to transport as many German prisoners to the UK as was logistically possible, including those held in America on Britain's behalf, and, by September 1946, it had succeeded in bringing back more than 400,000. The final turning-point occurred towards the end of that year, when the Attlee government came under increasing pressure from a number of public and official quarters to reassess its POW policy on humanitarian grounds. As a consequence, the shipment of German prisoners to the UK came to an abrupt halt, and, in the spring of 1947, Britain signed a Four-Power undertaking to repatriate them all, with the exception of those who had elected to stay as free workers, by no later than December 1948. Simply put, these about-turns in POW policy demonstrate that the course of the war itself and its aftermath had a profound effect on the ways in which the German POWs, and indeed the German people as a whole, were perceived and consequently treated by the British government. Viewed from this perspective, Britain's POW strategy can be seen within a broader framework of policy formation involving, for example, the deportation of enemy aliens in 1940 and the recruitment of DPs and foreign nationals to work in the UK after 1948. But it is hoped that the preceding chapters have

revealed something far more significant, which is that British officials, uniquely, deliberately and with some considerable forethought, designed a policy permitting the use of German POWs in attaining certain domestic and foreign policy objectives, and that in so doing, they compromised Britain's moral standing both at home and within the wider international community.

Perhaps more than anything else, however, the entire episode involving Britain's handling of German POWs demonstrates the fragility of international law in protecting the rights of prisoners of war from certain abuses. From the beginning, the 1929 Geneva Convention, which should have been Britain's main point of reference for guaranteeing humane treatment for POWs, did not prevent her from putting her own interests first. Of course, while the war was ongoing, Britain on the whole carried out her obligations under the Convention's terms; this was mainly due to the fact that Britain was aware of the danger that, were she to do otherwise, Germany would reciprocate and possibly subject Allied prisoners of war to even worse treatment. Nevertheless, even then, there were cases of circumvention or even outright breaches of the rules. In 1940, for example, the exigencies of war and the fears that it engendered resulted in the policy of deporting the majority of German POWs to Canada, despite the Geneva Convention's stipulation that they should be held by the country that had captured them. And again, in late 1942, the 'shackling crisis', involving the illegal tit-for-tat manacled of prisoners held by the British and the German authorities respectively, showed that the British government, and Churchill in particular, was less concerned to protect the prisoners than it was to test the nerves of the enemy. In addition, discussions on the possibility of exacting labour reparations from Germany also marked the significant departure from the accepted rules of international law that was taking place in the minds of certain British officials during

the war. Indeed, as early as 1942 the Malkin Committee established the theoretical foundation upon which the most significant element in the British POW strategy would be built: the mass transfer of German POWs to work in the UK after Allied victory, in contravention of the Geneva Convention's requirement that all prisoners should, in fact, be repatriated 'as soon as possible after the conclusion of peace'.

However, although a climate of opinion conducive to adopting a stringent policy towards a defeated Germany developed in Britain as the war went on, these early plans would have come to nothing had it not been for the nature of the peace terms which the Allies decided to lay down. Indeed, through its refusal to acknowledge a German government after Hitler's defeat, the policy of Unconditional Surrender undermined the Geneva Convention to such a degree that, by the war's end, it had been rendered virtually powerless to afford any legal protection whatsoever to the German POWs. Vulnerable and effectively without any recourse to international law, the best that the prisoners could hope for after May 1945 was that, at the very least, they would be treated according to the 'spirit of Geneva' by the 'liberal-minded' British. In general, the treatment they received at the hands of their British captors was humane, particularly when compared to that meted out to German POWs by the Soviets. However, the fact remains that Britain provided her prisoners with what amounted to a 'golden cage', the key to which, in the form of the Geneva Convention, had been dispensed with.

The reasons why Britain continued with such a controversial policy until 1948 are twofold. The first is the most obvious and often repeated official justification, which is that, economically, Britain simply could not afford to do without them. The policy was indeed shaped, to a large degree, by the realisation of the usefulness of prisoner-of-war labour that had developed since the arrival of Italian POWs in 1942,

and the hope that after 1945 such labour could play a part in the physical reconstruction of Great Britain, as a form of 'payment in kind' for the devastation caused. Of course, the government was, throughout the entire period in question, under enormous pressure to alleviate manpower shortages, particularly in agriculture. Not surprisingly, therefore, it came to regard German POWs as a partial solution to what seemed at the time an almost insurmountable problem. As demand in this sector steadily increased into the autumn of 1946, so too did the number of prisoners working on the land, until eventually one quarter of Britain's agricultural workforce was made up of German POWs.

There can be no doubt that such a large influx of workers into an otherwise labour-deprived sector of the economy was of considerable advantage to Britain. According to an official overview of the war and early post-war period, the performance of German POWs, as well as their Italian counterparts, had considerably helped to bolster the nation's food production.<sup>1</sup> It also played a vital role in improving the state of British farms: ditches and water courses had been cleaned out and widened, field drains had been cleared or laid afresh and a significant start had been made in the supply of water to fields and buildings.<sup>2</sup> In other industries, too, German POWs made an impact. From brick-making and road maintenance to labouring on building sites in towns and cities across the UK, these industrious prisoners became directly involved in the reconstruction of a nation that they, or at least their leaders, had once sought to destroy. As far as the government was concerned, therefore, not only were they an indispensable addition to the workforce, but it was also Britain's right to retain them for these essential tasks for as long as they were required. Consequently, ministers defending the government's decision to retain the prisoners

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<sup>1</sup> Keith A.H. Murray, *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Civil Series: Agriculture* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office and Longmans, Green and Co., 1955), 352-353.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

did not reflect on whether the policy was, in fact, humane, democratic or in keeping with the ‘best Socialistic principles’: it was simply a matter of ‘getting rid of them only when it suits us to do so’.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, the post-war state of Britain’s economy was not the only reason for the government’s POW labour strategy: the political climate in Europe, and Britain’s perception of her need to remain a dominant force within it, also loomed large in the minds of the policy makers. From 1943 onwards, lively and protracted discussions in official circles about the shaping of the post-war world revealed concern that the chief long-term threat to Britain’s position in the new Europe was the Soviet Union, and any policy that was formulated regarding the treatment of a defeated Germany had to take this into account. In 1942 and 1943, when Britain began to consider what Germany should pay as reparations after the war, an assumption that Russia would make unrealistic demands for the removal of German plant and capital goods, which would be ultimately damaging to Britain, was accompanied by a corresponding determination to limit what Russia could take. One of the proposed solutions to this problem was to substitute a sizeable proportion of Stalin’s \$10 billion reparation demand with German POW labour. However, as a strategy to keep the Soviet Union in check, it failed, because Britain was unable to convince either the US or Soviet foreign ministers of its viability. While America feared that a ‘slave labour’ policy would be condemned by the American public, for Russia it was not an ‘either, or’ option: she intended to remove as many prisoners to the East as she could anyway, in addition to her original demands. Ultimately, the refusal of her Allies to accept POW labour as part of a reparations deal was a reminder to Britain of her weakened position among the world powers. It did not, however, deter her government from

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<sup>3</sup> Hansard HOC, 27 March 1946, col. 533, and 25 October 1946, col. 242.

implementing the policy, and the considerable efforts that officials had made in formulating its details between 1942 and 1945 did not go to waste.

Another important part of Britain's POW strategy, which had slightly more obvious political connotations, was the policy of re-education. In many ways this policy reflected a particular Germanophobic attitude which had developed since the First World War among certain echelons of Britain's political elite, and which reached its climax during the Second World War, when the term 'Vansittartism' became part of the British vocabulary. The original intention of the policy makers had been to seek to eradicate what was regarded as the endemic 'German problem', and to improve relations with Germany by disseminating western democratic values there. In practice, of course, the re-education of German POWs conflicted sharply with the essentially undemocratic conditions of their captivity. As a result many prisoners were sceptical about a political system which espoused freedom but appeared to keep men in a form of slavery. The success of the policy in 'converting' the POWs was, therefore, always in doubt.

This, at least partial, failure to bring about a fundamental change in political outlook among the prisoners was of little consequence, since, by 1946 and the beginning of the Cold War, the original aims of re-education had shifted and democratisation had taken second place to the imperatives of anti-communism; the main concern now was to prevent Germany from swinging towards the East and throwing in her lot with Russia. What was required to produce this desired effect was an attitudinal change, brought about by encouraging the prisoners to identify with essentially western ideas, western prosperity and western strength; political change would follow later. In this sense, re-education can be seen as part of Britain's containment strategy, designed to limit Soviet ideological influence in Germany and,

in the process, to tilt the European balance of power decisively in Britain's favour. As a consequence, the policy had much broader implications than perhaps officials even realised at the time, in terms of how it reflected Britain's frame of mind at that particular point in her history, particularly with regard to her declining status as a great power and the emergence of the ideological battle fought out during the Cold War.

Whether or not the British government successfully achieved all of its aims is a different matter. Certainly, German POWs provided an invaluable source of agricultural labour at a critical time. However, it is impossible to determine whether or not their prolonged retention actually resulted in an absolute financial gain to Britain. An assessment of this kind would require details - of labour costs, in terms of wages paid to the prisoners; of the value of the goods that they produced; and of the money paid by the government for the maintenance of the prisoners. But, due mainly to administrative constraints, these figures were never calculated. The economic success of the scheme was not proven then and cannot be proven now. Politically, Britain's POW strategy achieved little other than to demonstrate the desperate lengths the government was willing to go to in order to curb the ambitions of the Soviet Union. In the process, relations between Britain and the Canadian government were stretched to their limit, the latter clearly believing that it had choices regarding the fate of the German POWs in its care when, in fact, as far as British officials were concerned, there was little room for negotiation. In Britain, too, the issue caused political controversy, which substantially increased throughout the period in question. The main focus of the criticism levelled by some Members of Parliament was that it was a legally and morally unacceptable policy, and unforgivable for a Labour government.



Of course, the whole argument concerning the government's moral responsibility to the prisoners is a complex one. There is no doubt that many German POWs were forced to endure, at different stages and to differing degrees, physical and mental hardships while in British hands: on the Continent, they languished under appalling conditions in open-field enclosures or in the Belgian POW camps until they could be shipped across the Channel; once in Britain they worked for little reward and faced ongoing uncertainty about the length of their captivity and the plight of their loved ones in Germany. The harsh realities of Britain's POW policy were, therefore, never in harmony with the ethical ideals of Socialism, or, for that matter, with the notion of liberal democracy. Moreover, the fact that they conflicted sharply with the requirements set out in the Nuremberg Charter, which forbade the use of slave labour, rendered the hypocrisy of the Labour government even more glaring in the eyes of those who became determined after 1945 to present a moral case for the prisoners' release.<sup>4</sup>

Ultimately, moral considerations did prove to be a major driving force behind Britain's POW policy in its different stages. In 1945 few would have doubted her moral right to bring German prisoners to the UK as a labour force. This was because, as Hobsbawm argued in 1994, moral boundaries had been blurred by the catastrophic events of two world wars, making a policy of this kind acceptable.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in view of the atrocities perpetrated on the peoples of Europe by the Germans, many, no doubt, considered that the prisoners were receiving their just deserts. As long as this atmosphere of moral superiority continued, the government was able to pursue its policy unhindered. However, when feelings of vengefulness began to subside during 1946, the entire question of moral justice was turned on its head. No doubt the

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<sup>4</sup> The Nuremberg Charter is discussed in detail in Chapter Five, 128 ff.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century* (London: Abacus, 1994).

government would have been happier to continue increasing its German POW labour force until all reserves of manpower had been exhausted. However, officials were now forced to respond to the humanitarian outcry from the public by promising to end shipments of more POWs to the UK, and announcing a schedule for repatriation. If there is one positive lesson from the entire episode, it is, therefore, the reassurance that under western-style democracy people are not forced to agree with the actions of their political leaders. On the contrary, while they might be cleverly persuaded to do so for a time, the fact that there are always competing view-points to take into account means that people, for the most part, cannot be induced indefinitely to accept policies that are unjust. Governments in these political systems will, of course, be motivated by a number of factors in their decision-making, including sheer necessity, economic or political self-interest, and, in some cases, even a desire for revenge, but in the long run they cannot afford to ignore the will of their voting public, to whom they are ultimately accountable.

Of course, the case of Britain's treatment of German prisoners of war after 1945 has to be set alongside others which also, and to a greater degree, demonstrated the vulnerability of POWs during the Second World War and the failure of major belligerents to observe international law in this respect. The British had not been guilty of wanton cruelty towards prisoners, as other countries had. On the Eastern front and in the Asia-Pacific theatre, for example, conditions had been far worse: over three million Soviet POWs were executed, or died of starvation or overwork at the hands of the Nazi regime; around a quarter of the 140,000 Allied personnel captured by the Japanese died in captivity;<sup>6</sup> and hundreds of thousands of German soldiers

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<sup>6</sup> Joan Beaumont, 'Protecting Prisoners of War, 1939-95' in Bob Moore and Kent Fedorowich (eds.), *Prisoners of War and their Captors in World War II* (Oxford: Berg, 1996), 279.

captured by the Red Army never returned home.<sup>7</sup> However, these extremes should not detract from the fact that *all* infringements of international law, including the enforced retention of POWs after 1945, constituted an abuse of a system essentially designed to protect these individuals. Moreover, that, in the form of the Instrument of Surrender, the Allies had effectively stretched the law to suit their purposes, should not be accepted as a defence.

The overall poor treatment afforded POWs between 1939 and 1945, as well as during the post-war period, encouraged an international reappraisal of the effectiveness of the 1929 Geneva Convention in upholding humanitarian standards. The 1949 Prisoner of War Convention's 143 articles resolved, according to Joan Beaumont, some of the ambiguities that had characterised the earlier regulations, and attempted to specify in clear terms many of the details concerning practical and health issues. Recognising that the wording of the 1929 regulation on the repatriation of prisoners had left much to interpretation, the new Convention stated, not that prisoners of war should be repatriated 'as soon as possible after the conclusion of peace', as had previously been the case, but rather that they should be returned home 'after the cessation of active hostilities'. Whether or not one considers this revised formulation as having been effective in preventing similar abuses occurring in post-1949 conflicts is, of course, worthy of a separate study and is not our concern here. Suffice it to say that the exploitation of German POWs by Great Britain between 1945 and 1948 had contributed to a general consensus of opinion among those involved in rewording the relevant article that in future there should be no room for manoeuvre and no 'escape clause' with which to justify legally delayed repatriation.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Dennis L. Bark and David R. Gress, *A History of West Germany: From Shadow to Substance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 361.

<sup>8</sup> By 'escape clause' the present author is referring to the words 'conclusion of peace' in the 1929 Geneva Convention stipulations regarding repatriation. Britain conveniently interpreted this to mean

The recognition that such abuse did occur, and that the Allied governments were not entirely innocent in this respect, makes it all the more surprising that, up to the present time, this aspect of the history of German POWs in Britain has been given so little attention in the literature. Perhaps the reason for this is simply that, for some, Britain's labour reparations policy pales into insignificance when compared, for example, with the harsh and more widely known treatment of POWs by the Soviet Union. On the other hand, it might be that international law as it affects POWs, as well as the changes in the application of this law brought about by the Allies' demand for Unconditional Surrender, proved so complex and ambiguous as to obscure our view of the truth and encourage instead a tendency to believe without question that Britain behaved entirely honourably, or as Churchill remarked in 1945, according to 'her customs and her nature'.<sup>9</sup> This illusion has been reinforced by stories of British acts of kindness and sense of fair play, which, although they are no doubt true, are over-emphasised in the history books that deal with this episode in Britain's recent past, suggesting that any questioning of these virtues was not what the post-war public wanted to hear. This reticence, moreover, has been echoed in Germany, where, after 1945, the population faced the psychological trauma of coming to terms with its part in the ruin, both moral and physical, of that country. In these circumstances, it seems, the German people relinquished the opportunity to portray as 'victims' German soldiers who had fought for Hitler, and consequently refrained, out of a sense of shame and guilt, from pointing out the lesser wrong-doings of others. It is hoped, therefore, that this study has gone some way to redress this imbalance in the literature by broadening our understanding of the complex mixture of economic, political, psychological and, of course, social factors that played such an essential role in the

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the signing of a peace treaty, which, of course, did not occur between Germany and the Allies, since the latter did not recognise a German government after the surrender.

<sup>9</sup> Hansard HOC, 18 January 1945, col. 423.

formulation of Britain's POW policy, as well as giving due weight to the one factor that seems to have been almost entirely omitted from previous discussions – the prisoners' right to go home.

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